The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY 2007

Murder and Skulduggery

Doug Allyn
Zoë Sharp
Jon L. Breen

$3.99 U[illegible] $4.99 CAN.

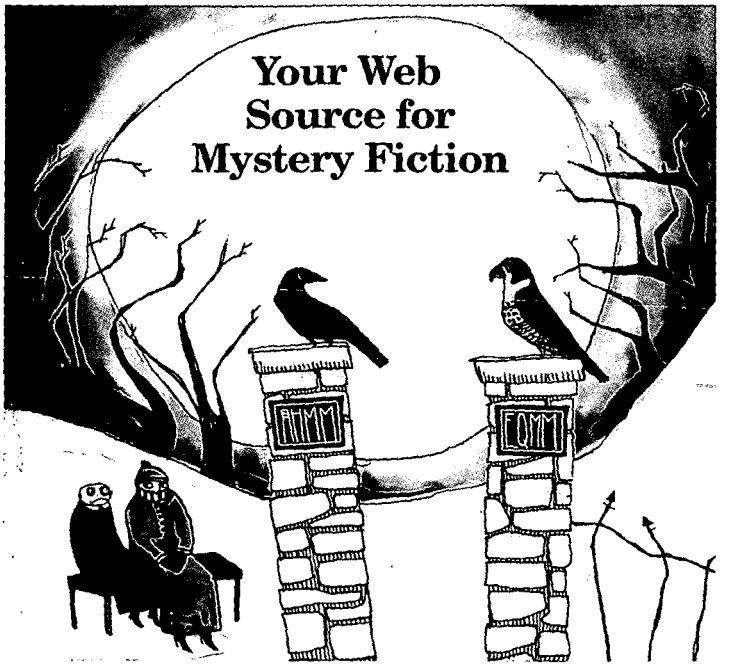
07

0 75470 08599 4

www.themysteryplace.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TheMysteryPlace.com



Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the world's leading short-fiction mystery magazines. Log on and enjoy:

- **Excerpts of current stories from the genre's leading authors**
- **Readers' Forum**
- **Awards lists**
- **Book reviews**
- **Mystery puzzles**

All this and much more!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK® MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN® MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

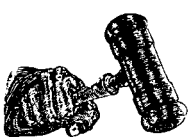
JULY 2007

CONTENTS

Off-duty P.I.
Page 48

Deadly lover's lane
Page 84

Cover illustration by
Rafael DeSoto
©1948



Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY
10016

Note: indicia on
page 144

www.themysteryplace.com

FICTION

Dead as a Dog
BY DOUG ALLYN 2

A Bridge Too Far
BY ZOË SHARP 25

No Wick for the Rested
BY MONICA QUILL 36

A Darkening of Flies
BY BRIAN MUIR 48

Serious Money
BY JOHN MORGAN WILSON 61

The Saga of Sidney Paar
BY JON L. BREEN 73

Over the Edge
BY JAMES H. COBB 84

Ms. Mitty
BY BRENDA JOZIATIS 117

The Problem of Suicide Cottage
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 123

Camouflage
BY ALANNA KNIGHT 140

REVIEWS

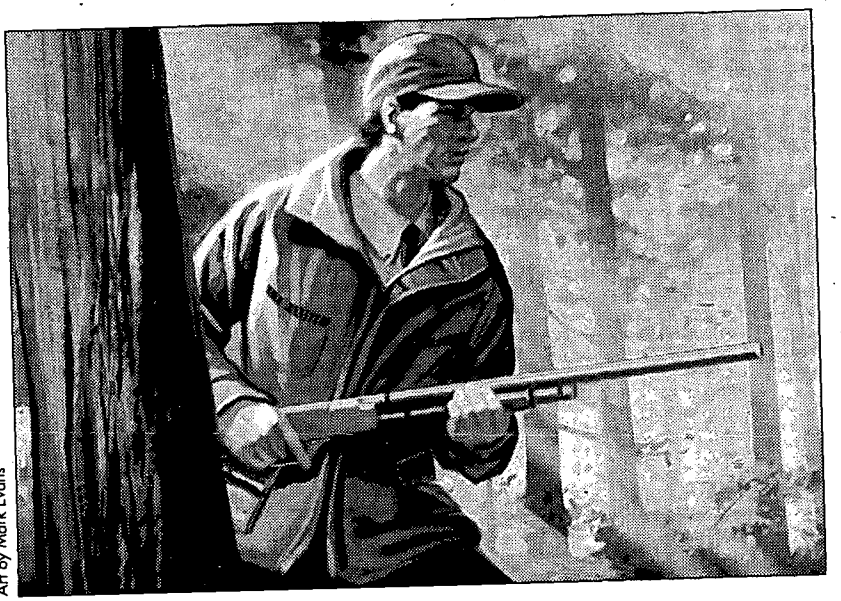
Blog Bytes BY ED GORMAN 60

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 137

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES & PASSPORT TO CRIME

Skin Deep
BY RENÉE YIM 102

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Mark Evans

DEAD AS A DOG

by Doug Allyn

"A girl asked me about killing Hitler today," I said.

Janie gave me a taut smile but it was all she could manage. The hospice aide who was massaging Janie's calves glanced up at me with arched eyebrows.

"I teach Political Science at Hancock State," I explained. "We're covering assassinations this week. Martin Luther King, JFK, Sadat. How destructive to society their deaths were. But if a student asks me about killing Hitler or Stalin, I know it's going to be a good class."

"So you teach 'em what? That whacking some folks ain't such a bad idea?" the aide asked drily. She was an older black woman with a soft Afro, liquid eyes, strong hands. Her nametag read *Norma*. I wondered how she could work every day in a place where most patients were dying. Like Janie. My wife. My life.

"I try to impart a given number of facts," I said. "And beyond that, I hope they learn to think for themselves."

"Wish I'd had your class," Norma smiled. "If I'd thought a little harder, would've skipped nursing school, found me a rich man to marry instead."

"And miss all this excitement?" Janie murmured.

©2007 by Doug Allyn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And we laughed. Partly because it was funny, mostly because it's amazing that a woman in her condition can joke at all.

My wife is dying. A glioblastoma, a cancerous tumor, is wrapped around her spinal cord. Inoperable. Terminal. And very aggressive. It's early October now. They tell me she won't see Christmas.

So I laughed, though it wasn't much of a joke. There aren't many smiles in my life these days.

After my morning hospice visit, I headed home for lunch. I wasn't hungry but Sparky would be.

Doug Allyn returns to *EQMM* this month with a strong new protagonist and a tale that is characteristically atmospheric, suspenseful, and moving. The Michigan author never sets out to create series characters, but he's so good at getting inside his fictional creations that they live in readers' minds and demand a callback. It's those unforgettable characters that have earned the Michigan author eight first-place finishes in the *EQMM* Readers Award voting. ✝

Our suburban house is larger than we need. We'd planned to fill it with more children, so it sits on a large, five-acre lot, bordering a forest. When we first looked the place over, I think the land was more important than the house to Janie.

She loved the outdoors, a four-season girl. Skier, cross-country runner, backpacker. Anything to be out in the wind. I do those things too, but only to be with her. The flame of Janie's vitality could melt a snowman's heart. But it's burning low now. And I'm not sure I can go on without her. Or want to.

But I don't have a choice. We have twins, Seth and Josh, seven and a half years old. Fraternal twins, not identical. Seth is more like me, dark and slender. Josh, more like his mother, blond, square-faced, a blocky little body bursting with energy.

The boys are staying with my in-laws for the duration. A blessing, though I miss them terribly. With Janie's illness and the teaching schedule that maintains our health insurance, I have all I can handle.

Silence greeted me as I walked into the foyer. Usually Sparky, Janie's bull terrier, charges the door when I come home, barking, a barrel-chested black and white pirate of a pup. The noisy greeting lasts until he sees I'm alone. Then he gives me a dutiful tail-wag and goes on about his business.

Not today. Tossing my jacket on an easy chair, I walked through the house. "Sparky?"

Nothing. Probably outside. He has his own dog-door exit into our fenced backyard. I walked through to the den and scanned the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yard through the picture window. Still no Sparky. The yard was empty . . . Damn! The back gate was open.

Double damn. I'd noticed him jumping at it the other day, meant to tie it shut . . . Grabbing my binoculars off the window ledge, I quickly scanned the field beyond the fence. And felt a flood of relief as I spotted the little terrier lounging in the grass just outside the gate.

I opened the back door. "Sparky! Lunch!"

He raised his head, then laid it back down. "Sparky! Come on!" This time he didn't move at all.

Odd. Concerned now, I started across the lawn toward the gate. But halfway there I broke into a run. Even at that distance I could see the blood.

"Arnie?"

I glanced up. Dr. David Westbrook, our veterinarian, rested a hand on my shoulder. And I could read the bad news in his face. "How is he?"

"I'm sorry, Arnie. He's gone. Too much blood loss."

"What happened to him?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," he said, glancing around his busy waiting room. "Could you step back here, please?"

I followed him into the sterile operating room. Sparky was laid out on a stainless-steel table. The wound in his guts had been cleaned up a bit, but it was still a vile, savage hole.

"My God, Dave, what would cause something like that?" I whispered.

"A hunting arrow, I think. Where did you find him?"

"In the field behind our house. He got loose, may have been running in the woods—"

"And deer season opened three days ago," he finished for me.

"It's not open season on family dogs, and we own that land. You think a hunter shot him?"

"I'm not sure. I've seen arrow wounds before, but never one quite like this. Some high-tech broadheads pop open like switchblades when they strike. This one apparently blew clean through, more like a rifle."

"Then why do you think it was an arrow?"

"See these blue smudges around the wound? It's chalk dust from a tracking string."

"Chalk dust? I don't understand."

"Some bow-hunters attach a string to their arrows, dusted with chalk. When the arrow strikes and the animal bolts, the string drags on the ground, leaving a trail they can follow. But I've never seen blue dust before. Most hunters use Day-Glo orange chalk, easier to spot."

"My God. Day-Glo dust? Switchblade arrows? I thought hunting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was supposed to get you back to nature."

"I know, it seems cruel. But the truth is, once the animal's been hit, anything that kills them quicker is more humane in the end. Not that there's anything humane about the sonofabitch who did this. We have a crematorium here. If you like, I can take care of the remains for you."

I just stared at him.

"The remains," he repeated, not unkindly. "If you—never mind. I know a thing like this is a helluva shock, Arnie. Go home, take a break. You can call me if you decide to—"

"Thanks, David, but I'll take him home with me."

"Are you sure?"

"No. Right now I'm not sure about anything." But as I drove back to town, I had a small parcel in the trunk of my car. The final remains of our beloved dog. Which left me with two impossible questions.

One, how could anyone do a thing like that? Kill a harmless pet?

And two, what on earth was I going to tell Janie?

The second problem had an easier answer than the first. I lied, flat-out. Perhaps the first time I've ever lied to my wife about anything serious.

A risky thing to do. Ordinarily, Janie can read me like a neon billboard. And her first question is always, "How are the boys? And Sparky?"

"He misses you," I said. And she missed the fib. Perhaps because her eyes were closed. She was in a lot of pain. Some days it takes all of her concentration to keep it at bay.

I didn't stay long. When the pain gets this intense, they have to sedate her to prevent seizures. The intervals between attacks keep getting shorter.

But God help me, just this once, I was almost grateful for it.

Driving through the village on my way home, I passed Algoma Sporting Goods. On impulse, I parked in front and went inside. A big store, family owned, in an older building, barnboard walls with a high, embossed-metal ceiling.

The front of the store was mostly filled with school gear: baseball gloves, cleats, basketball jerseys. I bought a Nerf football for my boys here once. But halfway back, the games change from high-school sports to woodland slaughter.

No Nerf gear back here. The clothing is heavy canvas, color-camouflaged to resemble the northern Michigan forest. The entire back wall is a gigantic display of firearms, rifles, and shotguns, three tiers of them, floor to ceiling. Every caliber from a Boy Scout beginner's twenty-two popgun to a monster .458 Winchester Magnum, capable of killing an Alaskan grizzly at three hundred yards. Even if the bear's hiding behind a tree.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But it was the display beside it that caught my eye. Modern hunting bows of enormous complexity, equipped with offset pulleys and wheels and counterweights and telescopic sights, arrows of aluminum, titanium, and fiberglass composites. Robin Hood wouldn't have recognized a damned thing on that wall.

"Can I help you?" A redneck salesman materialized at my left shoulder. Paunchy with a scruffy beard, wearing a faded flannel shirt. This definitely wasn't the Gap.

"Do you carry chalk dust for tracking strings?"

"Sure, right over here," he said, moving behind the counter. "What's your poison, pal, Day-Glo orange or neon yellow?"

"How about blue?"

"Blue? Sorry, we don't carry it. I expect you can get blue dust down the street at the hardware store, though."

"Do you know anyone who uses blue chalk?"

He blinked, confused by the question. And glanced over my shoulder, as if the answer might be behind me. "Blue? Naw, not offhand. You ain't a bow hunter, are ya, mister?"

"No."

"Didn't think so. 'Scuse me, I got other customers." He beat a hasty retreat, jumpy as a kid with a crib sheet up his sleeve. I turned to see what he'd looked at . . . and froze. The wall behind me held a stunning display as surreal as a Star Wars set.

Crossbows. But not the ancient arbalests of the Middle Ages. More like weird weapons from Middle Earth. Ultra-modern killing machines. Hollow plastic stocks, geared cranking mechanisms, bipods and rifle scopes. Names like Revolution XS, Quad 400, and Talon Super Max.

They didn't fire standard arrows, they shot bolts of steel, with replaceable broadhead tips, some with serrated bleeder blades sharp enough to transfix an elk.

Or gut a small dog.

At home, I actually paused in the doorway a moment, waiting for Sparky's welcoming racket. Which was crazy. He was in the box under my arm. And he'd never welcome anyone again. But as bad as I felt about it, I couldn't let my guard down now.

With Janie in the hospice and the boys staying with my in-laws, we didn't need the added stress of a slaughtered dog. Better to tell everyone Sparky just . . . ran away. It was thin, but I could probably sell it. But to make it work, I had to conceal the evidence.

Grabbing a spade from the garden shed, I carried Sparky out of our backyard into the grassy field beyond our fence. The greenbelt stretches the full width of the subdivision, nearly a quarter-mile, room for the kids from a dozen families to play together. The homes are all similar, faux New England saltboxes with vinyl siding, set on two-acre lots that end at the edge of the field. Our lot is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a bit larger, a full five acres that extends well into the deep woods beyond.

Halfway across the field, some juniper bushes shielded me from view. It would have to do. Gently setting the box down, I began to dig. In the soft, moist earth, it didn't take long. The hole, two feet square, four feet deep, seemed much too small to contain the spirit of our rambunctious little dog. For a moment I could see Janie running across this very field with Sparky in hot pursuit . . .

I slammed the slide projector of my memory shut. Hard. I can't afford to think too much about Janie. If I start to cry, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop. Janie's always been the strong one, irrepressible. But it's my turn to carry the weight now. She needs my strength, and so do the boys. Somehow I have to manage this. So mostly, I try to shut myself down. To keep from feeling anything at all.

But burying Sparky in that empty field, alone, was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Placing him gently in his little grave, I recited the Lord's Prayer. Couldn't think of anything else. Then I carefully covered him over.

The turned earth looked too raw, too visible. I was gathering scraps of underbrush to camouflage it when I noticed the blood.

Glistening crimson dewdrops, darkening to maroon now as they congealed in the autumn air. Sparky must have dragged himself past this spot earlier. Bleeding. And dying. In agony. Trying to get home.

In the late afternoon sun, the blood trail gleamed like a beacon in the grass. Showing where he'd passed. And where he'd come from.

I don't recall consciously making the decision. But when I'd finished concealing Sparky's grave, I turned and marched slowly into the forest, tracking the blood spoor, clutching my spade like a spear.

It was like stepping back in time. At first, the trees were scattered, mostly aspens at the edge of the wood, new growth that had sprung up after the land had been leveled for the subdivision. But a few yards beyond them, I was already deep in the primeval woodlands, poplars and pines towering overhead, their swaying limbs splintering the sunlight, dappling the forest floor, making the blood trail damned difficult to follow.

But I managed. As I took each careful step, totally focused on the sparse red spatters on the matted leaves, I felt myself slipping into an ancient rhythm. A mindset left over from an earlier age, when men had stalked this land for survival, when losing a blood trail might mean slow death from starvation . . .

It faded out. The distance between blood dots had been gradually lengthening until I had to stop at each small spatter and scan the ground ahead for the next one. Twice, I lost the trail and had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to circle the last dot until I crossed the next. But not this time. The blood had vanished altogether.

And as I straightened up and took stock, I realized why. This was the place. I was standing in the killing zone.

Off to my left, the forest floor was roughed up in the center of a small clearing, leaves scattered, the soil gouged, torn by the paws of a small dog thrashing about in agony. I was certain of the spot. Some of the displaced leaves were smudged with blue chalk marks. And smeared blood.

I did a slow pirouette, scanning the forest around me. Most hunters favor the dawn hours and late afternoon. Perhaps the man I wanted to meet was watching me even now . . .

Then I spotted it. Thirty yards off. A small hut, a shooting blind, hand-built of dun-colored canvas and dead branches. Artfully camouflaged. If I hadn't been looking, I would never have noticed it.

I approached it warily, gripping my spade fiercely with both hands. But there was no need. The blind was empty. As I peered inside, I realized I was trembling with tension, taut as a bowstring. Or a cocked crossbow. I'd really wanted the bastard to be here.

But he wasn't. So instead of splitting his skull with my shovel, I took my rage out on his handiwork, ripping his hut apart with my bare hands, hurling the pieces as far into the forest as I could. In two furious minutes I reduced his hunting blind to a few bits of scattered wreckage. A stick here, a shred of canvas there. Nuked. Utterly destroyed.

Like my world.

Half an hour later, I was in the school gym, helping with my sons' peewee basketball practice. It was a hoot: short-legged little grubbers charging about like puppies in a pen, lofting impossible shots, blundering out of bounds, fouling one another with glee, having a grand time as suburban dads like myself tried to teach them a few basics along the way.

I've never missed a practice or a game, struggling to keep things as normal as humanly possible for the twins as their mother fades out of our lives. But today I was especially eager to be here. The assistant coaches are all part-timers. And one of them, Jerry Landry, is an Algoma County deputy sheriff.

He was at a corner basket, teaching the rudiments of rebounding to a half-dozen half pints, tossing a ball against the backboard so they could scramble for it on the way down, grinning as they knocked each other sprawling.

"Can I talk to you a second, Jerry?"

"Sure. What's up, Doc? Or should I call you Professor?" He lobbed up another ball, letting it drop into the scrim. A tall, rawboned man, thinning reddish-blond hair, western sideburns, a torn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Algoma High sweatshirt, striped uniform slacks, and soiled sneakers. A single dad, divorced. A club I'll be joining soon enough.

"What are the penalties for killing a dog?"

"Depends on where the dog was and what it was doing. And who did the killing."

"The dog was on my property—"

"Let me guess, you live in that new Birchcrest subdivision?"

"That's right. So?"

"So don't feel like the Lone Ranger, Professor. We've had beaucoup complaints about dogs and cats being killed in that neighborhood."

"What are you doing about it?"

"Not a lot. We're the sheriff's department, not the pet patrol—Hey! Settle down out there! This is basketball, not Saturday Night Smackdown!"

"You're telling me some loony's killing pets and you're not even trying to find him?"

"No need to," Landry said evenly. "We know who he is, or think we do. That's the problem."

"I don't understand."

"That's because you're not from here. You moved up here to teach at the college, bought a nice house, probably joke about the local rednecks in the teachers' lounge, right? But now your dog's dead. Well, welcome to my world, pal."

"What are you saying?"

"Probably more than I should. Can we go off the record a minute? Not a citizen beefing to a cop, just two guys talking in a gym?"

"Of course."

"Okay, here's the deal. We're fairly sure the guy killing the animals is Chandler Sinclair. That name mean anything to you?"

"You mean—?"

"Right. Sinclair Paper Mill, Sinclair Timber, the Sinclair Library at the U. The folks who employ about four hundred people in this town. That Sinclair family."

"And? Because they've got bucks they're above the law?"

"Nope, not for a second. If Chan runs a stoplight or shoots the mayor, I'll bust him like any other perp. But since his fat campaign contributions helped get my boss elected, our little force has better things to do than worry about pets disappearing in Chan's neighborhood."

"It's not his neighborhood, it's mine."

"It used to be his. All of it. At one time, his family owned most of this town."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Anything you want, Professor. Just don't expect us to do it for you. Truth is, Chan Sinclair's not wrapped too tight. All he gives a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rip about is taking game with high-tech weapons that probably cost more than my car. When his dad was alive he could control him, more or less, but the old man died last year and now Chan's off the leash. He's only got a sister left and he treats her like hired help. You can file a complaint and I'll have a talk with Sinclair. But even if you could prove he killed your dog, Chan would only pay a fine and it might bring retaliation from Chan or his lawyers. The law's a little different up here for strangers like you and a local guy like Chan. He may be a crazy sumbitch, but he's our crazy sumbitch."

"And his plants employ a lot of local men, I understand that. But that doesn't give him the right to kill people's pets."

"Nobody said it did. I'm not telling you to let this go, Professor. If he'd killed my dog, I'd damn sure do something about it. Don't know a man who wouldn't. I'm just saying you'd best keep it off the books, if you get my drift. Hey, Jake! Don't hold the ball like that, they'll tie you up every time. Swing your elbows, boy, clear yourself some room!"

"That's a little rough, isn't it? For grade school?"

"We ain't just teaching basketball, Prof, we teach life here. And it's good advice. If you mess with Chan Sinclair, you'd best come down swingin' your elbows. High and wide."

Interesting advice. Especially from a cop. After basketball practice, I took the boys out for grease-burgers at McDonald's. Chose it deliberately, because it has a playroom. The twins had a great time scrambling through the tunnels. And I had time to think.

And what I thought was: This was no time to swing my elbows at Chandler Sinclair or anyone else.

With Janie ill, I had to stay focused and keep things together. I don't have tenure at Hancock State, my contract runs year to year. The administration has been very understanding about Janie's illness, but the fact is, our income has been cut in half. I need my job to keep food on the table and to maintain our health insurance. And the Hancock administration is ever so proud of its new Sinclair Library wing.

So I decided to do the prudent thing. The adult thing. I would let it pass. And I did.

Until the next day. When all hell broke loose.

After morning classes, I stopped by the hospice to sit with Janie awhile. She was getting her rubdown, listening without comment while I rattled on about school. I was afraid her silence might indicate pain. And it did. But not the way I thought.

Halfway through the rubdown Janie gave Norma a look, and the woman excused herself. Janie sat up slowly, and turned to face me, squinting against the pain the effort caused her. I reached out to help but she shook her head.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I had a visitor earlier," she said coldly. "Yvonne Westbrook, the veterinarian's wife? She brought me flowers. Thought I might be depressed because of Sparky."

Damn. "She had no right to tell you."

"It's not her fault, Arnie. It probably never occurred to her you'd lie to me about something so serious. I'm not gone yet, you know. I'm still a part of this family. And I'm entitled to the damned truth! From what Yvonne said, I gather someone deliberately killed our dog. Is that true?"

I hesitated, then caved. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"Sparky got out the back gate and went exploring in the woods behind the subdivision. He was apparently shot by a hunter."

"Where was he?"

"Maybe . . . forty or fifty yards into the woods. A bow hunter had a shooting blind there."

"But . . . we own that land, don't we?"

"I think so, yes."

"A bow and arrow," she said flatly. "My God. Do you think the children might be in danger?"

"No, of course not. I know it's difficult to accept, but Sparky was only a dog."

"And you're positive that a psycho who could shoot a helpless animal and leave it to die might not do the same to a child? You're willing to bet the lives of my sons on his sterling character and judgment?" She closed her eyes, fighting against a wave of nausea. Then took a shallow, ragged breath.

"Did you report it to the police?"

"Of course. Well, sort of. I talked to Jerry Landry at the gym, he's a deputy sheriff. He said that even if we could prove it, the man would only get a fine. And he might retaliate against us."

"How? By killing our dog? Or will—?" She broke off in a spasm of coughing. Then lay carefully back on her pillows, utterly ashen. The aide hurried in a moment later. Janie would need absolute quiet now to avoid a seizure. I had to leave.

Outside the door, I lingered in the hallway, wanting desperately to go back in, to somehow change the look in her eyes. Erase the contempt. In nine years together, she'd been angry with me many times. But never like this. We needed to talk this out. But we couldn't.

I swallowed, hard, only a notch away from crying. Started walking, so no one would see. And realized I was right on the edge of losing it. My love was dying, I'd be raising our sons alone, my job was shaky, and now . . .

Enough! I just couldn't take any more. Couldn't deal with one more goddamned thing.

But at the same time, I realized that any chance of letting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sparky's killing pass was gone now. I'd have to do something about it.

The Sinclair house wasn't hard to find. Algoma's a small town and Chandler Sinclair was listed in the phone book with everyone else. Nor was his home particularly plush. The yard was broad enough for football, but the house was a rambling red-brick ranch, set on a hill that looked down on the woods behind our subdivision.

We were practically neighbors.

I rang the doorbell. A woman answered, wearing designer slacks and a red silk blouse. Mid twenties, pudgy, dark hair, dark circles under her eyes.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Professor Dylan, from Hancock State College. Is Mr. Sinclair in?"

"He's in, but he doesn't see many people. What's it about?"

"I'm sorry, you are . . . ?"

"Dana Sinclair."

"Ah, the sister, of course. I really do need to talk to Mr. Sinclair. It's about hunting."

"You don't look much like a hunter, but maybe he'll see you. It's all he really cares about." She hit an intercom button, set in the wall beside the door. "Chan? Some guy to see you, says it's about hunting. You in?"

The croaked reply through the small speaker sounded like a frog's command. I couldn't understand it, but Dana apparently could. Long practice, no doubt.

"He's in the den. Through the living room, that door over there."

"Thank you." Odd décor for a living room. Hardwood floors, no carpeting. Furniture widely spaced. More like a rough country cottage than a wealthy home. The den door was intricately hand-carved, though. A hunting scene. I knocked, and went in.

And stopped. It wasn't a den, it was a trophy room. The upper walls were lined with mounted heads, dozens of deer, bear, coyotes. Below them, a rack of weapons that could have equipped a small army. Rifles, pistols, and at least a dozen different crossbows, ancient and modern.

The man coming toward me was equally shocking. Bloated, misshapen, he was dressed in full military camouflage, olive drab, but he didn't look like any soldier I've ever seen. More like an egg with broomstick arms. And withered legs. His thighs were thin as sticks thrust into boy-sized boots. He was in a power wheelchair with four oversized wheels. Built like a tank. Or an ORV. Its cleated treads were powered by an electric motor that hummed like a dynamo.

"What?" he asked, stopping in front of me. "Oh. They didn't tell you about my chair."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No," I managed. "I didn't know—"

"That I was handicapped?" he finished. "I'm not. They are." He gestured at the trophies with a withered talon of a hand. "They're dead. I'm still here. Dana said something about hunting?"

"Actually, it's about killing. I believe you killed my dog, Mr. Sinclair."

"No kidding? So what's the problem? Was it an expensive dog?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is? We've got a leash law in this county, mister. A licensed hunter can shoot any dog guilty of chasing deer. Which makes any dog loose in the woods fair game."

"He was on private property."

"What property?"

"The five-acre plot at the end of the Birchcrest subdivision."

"It was you!" he said, his bug eyes bulging. "You're the sonofabitch who tore up my blind!"

"I destroyed a blind. It was on my land."

"Your land? My family owned and hunted that section for a hundred years. Trophy bucks don't give a damn about property lines, they range five to ten miles a day—"

"I don't care what bucks do or what your parents used to own. We own it now, and you're not welcome. You had no right to kill our dog."

"I didn't kill your damned dog! Every time somebody whacks a mutt around here they blame it on me. Usually because they want a payoff. If they ask nicely, sometimes I pay. But not this time. Where do you get off wrecking that blind? Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to build it, with these hands? Even with Dana helping, it took me days."

"You should have built it somewhere else."

"There isn't anywhere else! Not for me. Not that I can get to in a chair."

"You should have thought of that before you killed my dog."

"I already said I didn't kill it."

"Unfortunately, I don't believe you." I moved to the display of crossbows on the wall. Steel bolts with savage broad-heads were on the shelf below them. Along with a cardboard vial of chalk dust. Blue. "Why do you use blue chalk dust, Mr. Sinclair? I'm told most hunters use orange."

"That's why I don't. It's a bit difficult for me to track game with my . . . situation. If another hunter spots an orange mark, he knows it's a wounded buck. He might find it first, claim it for his own. Make off with it."

"Maybe you should take up a gentler sport. Like chess."

"Screw you, Dylan. You don't hunt, do you?"

"No."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Didn't think so. You should try it. Men are natural predators, you know. All men. It's in our genes. Even snobs like you."

"You know nothing about me."

"Wrong. I know a million self-righteous wimps like you! You think eating tofu makes you morally superior to people who kill their own food. I've got news for you, pal, taking game is a reality check for life. From the eagles in the air to the worms that get us when we die, every natural creature on this earth spends most of its time hunting. God must love hunters, he sure made enough of them. Including us. Especially us. You ought to give it a shot, Dylan. Hunting's how the world really works. Puts you in touch with your inner predator."

"Be careful what you wish for, Mr. Sinclair. And from now on, stay the hell off my land."

Sinclair stared down at his clawed hands for a moment, as if wishing for the strength to strike me. Just once. When he looked up, his eyes were as blank and hard as a lizard's. Crippled or not, he was a very formidable man.

"Maybe I will, maybe not. If you want trouble, you came to the right place, sport. When you wrecked my little hut in the forest, you messed with my life. Maybe I'll return the favor."

"I'd stick to dogs, if I were you. They can't shoot back."

I stalked out of the den, slamming the door behind me. Dana Sinclair overtook me in the foyer at the front door.

"I couldn't help overhearing. I'm very sorry about what happened, Professor Dylan, but . . . well, you see how he is. Was your dog black and white? A little guy?"

"You saw him? You were there?"

"I'm always there. I have to walk Chandler out to his blind in case his chair gets stuck. He did kill your dog. And others, too."

"Would you talk to the police about it?"

"No! And for God's sake don't tell anyone I told you. Things are hard enough for me as it is."

"Then why do you stay?"

"He's my brother," she said simply. "When I was a girl, we lived in a lovely home on State Street. Three stories with winding spiral staircases. But after Chan was born, the stairs were too difficult for a wheelchair, so we moved here. One level, easier for him to get around. No one asked me whether I wanted to move. It was all for Chan. And when my father died, he left everything to Chan because he knew damned well if I had two nickels of my own I'd be gone. This is my home as much as his, but I'm just a housekeeper here."

"Sis!" the intercom crackled to life. "Come here, please. My colostomy bag's almost full."

"I have to go. But you'd better watch yourself, Professor. Chan's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mean. When he warned you about your house, he wasn't kidding. He'll get even somehow."

As I backed out of Sinclair's driveway, I noticed a patrol car parked in the turnout at the end of the block. Couldn't see who was behind the wheel, maybe Jerry Landry, maybe someone else. But it wasn't just sitting there, it was idling.

As I drove off, the prowl car pulled out, tailed me half a block, then made a U-turn and drove back to the Sinclairs'. And stopped.

It could have been a coincidence, but I didn't think so. It felt more like a message. That in this town, the Sinclairs had their own private police force. Bought and paid for.

"We're flunking the Hitler test," Janie murmured. "The law failed us when they left that psycho running loose. We'll have to deal with him ourselves." I was sitting by her bedside at the hospice. It was noon, but the shades were drawn and the lights dimmed to avoid any strain on her eyes. Her equilibrium was very fragile now. Teetering on the edge of the abyss.

"How do you mean that?" I asked.

"You're the political scientist; how do governments manage a problem like this?"

"Well, if a nation is attacked or its citizens are injured, it can counter with a measured, equivalent response sufficient to deter future aggression. The police actions in Korea and Desert Storm, for example. Or it can act on a massive scale to remove the threat. As in World War II and the second Gulf War. I think we can skip the nuclear option."

"Do any of those apply?" Janie asked. "I can't think."

"I don't think so, honey. Even if we found a way to strike back, would retaliation help the situation or make it worse? I'm not sure the man's playing with a full deck. And he's wealthy enough to cause serious trouble for us."

"More than I have now, do you think? Too bad it didn't happen a few months ago, when I could still hobble around. If I could move, I'd do something about this maniac. God knows I've got little enough to lose."

I caught the savage edge in her tone, and realized her anger was a stimulant, pumping her adrenaline, keeping her mind off the pain. But her judgment was as shaky as her condition.

"Janie, we can't respond with anything illegal. If I get caught, the kids will have no one. The law isn't perfect but it's all we have. We should leave it to them."

She didn't speak for a very long while. I thought she might have fallen asleep.

"Arnie, please don't take this the wrong way, but . . . you're a teacher. You love to discuss things, talk them out. So leaving Sin-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clair to the law is a . . . convenient option for you. Because it means you don't have to do anything at all. But it's also very dangerous. Because if that lunatic harms one of our children, it'll be too late for talk. And if that happens, I don't think you could forgive yourself. Nor could I. I'm sorry I can't think clearly enough to help you, so you'll have to decide. But if we're truly dealing with a Hitler situation here, you have to do the right thing, Arnie. Whether it's legal or not. You have to."

"I will, my love," I said softly. "Trust me." But I don't think she heard. Her breathing had gone shallow as the sedation took hold, carrying her far away.

A giant splotch of red greeted me when I pulled into our driveway. At first I thought someone had struck a deer in the road, then I realized the whole house had been splattered with red explosions. Paintballs, the bloody mess drooling off the roof, streaks of crimson down the siding like blood, as though our home had been butchered.

Skidding my Toyota to a halt in front of the Algoma sheriff's department, I stalked inside, slamming the door open so hard that the officer behind the counter jumped, startled. Deputy Jerry Landry. One look at my face was enough.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't want to put you in the middle of this, Jerry, I need to see your boss."

He started to argue, thought better of it. "Come on, I'll walk you back."

I trailed him down the narrow corridor to an office at the end. He rapped once, showed me in.

If anything, the office was more Spartan than the squad room. Institutional green concrete, tiled floors, a metal desk. A heavyset cop behind it, squared off and gray as a concrete block. His nametag read Wolinski.

"Sorry to bother you, Stan," Landry said. "This is Professor Dylan, teaches at the college. He has a problem."

"That's why we're here," Wolinski said. "What seems to be the trouble, Professor?"

I told him about Sparky's death, my run-in with Chandler Sinclair, and the vandalism at my home. When I finished, Wolinski arched an eyebrow at Landry, and Jerry confirmed that I'd reported it.

"Did you write it up, Landry?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. And the prof here isn't the only one. We've had a number of reports about pets being killed in that area."

"Reports?" Wolinski echoed. "Has anyone actually filed a complaint against Chan?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, sir, no official complaints."

"Can't say I blame 'em," Wolinski sighed. "Can I ask you something, Professor? If you don't hunt, why should you care what Chan Sinclair does in those woods?"

"Maybe I wouldn't if he hadn't killed my dog."

"I understand that, and killing a dog is serious business. It's also a dangerous charge to make without proof. Do you have any evidence that Chan did it? Did you see him, or did he admit to it?"

"I was told that he killed the dog by someone who would know."

"Does that someone have a name?"

"I promised not to involve them. My dog was killed with a crossbow bolt. Does anyone else in the area hunt with a crossbow?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but the fact that the man owns a crossbow is hardly conclusive. Mr. Sinclair owns a lot of things."

"He also dusts his tracking string with blue chalk, which I understand is quite unusual. There were blue chalk marks around my dog's wound."

"Several of the other reports mentioned blue chalk too," Landry offered.

"Even so, with all due respect, Professor, from where I sit, this comes down to a disagreement between neighbors. This part of the state, we're a little more casual about property lines than folks are down in Detroit, or wherever it is you come from. Up here, a fella hunts another fella's land, no one thinks much of it. If a dispute arises, grown men should be able to work it out."

"This is a lot more than a dispute!"

"So I gather. And I want you to know we take your concerns seriously. I'll have Deputy Landry here talk to Chan about the paintballs, but if he denies it, and I expect he will, our hands are tied. Every kid in town owns a paintball gun these days. And I'd advise you against taking any further action against Mr. Sinclair on your own, Professor. Don't tear down any more blinds. There are laws against hunter harassment in this state."

Landry walked me out. In the corridor, he glanced around to be sure he wouldn't be overheard.

"Sorry about that," he said, "but I warned you. The sheriff's probably on the phone to Chan right now, telling him you were here. And as whacked-out as he is, it might push him over the edge. You'd better look to your family, Professor. Especially your boys."

"How? What am I supposed to do?"

Again, Landry glanced around. "Look, I could lose my job for telling you this, but you won't get any help from this department. Sinclair owns it. The sheriff has to run for election and Sinclair's his biggest contributor. But that doesn't mean he owns all of us. Between you and me, I think Sinclair's dangerous. And if he were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

threatening my family . . . well. During hunting season he never misses a day in those woods. Hunting accidents happen all the time and they're damned hard to solve. We've been carrying a few on the books for years."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing, Professor. We never had this conversation. If I can help, let me know how and I'll try. But keep in mind that I'm a police officer and I have to do my duty. And my duty is whatever that man in there says it is. You can see how things are here."

"Yes, I'm afraid I can."

"Then you do what you have to and good luck to you. See you at basketball practice next week. And remember, keep your elbows up."

That night, the unthinkable finally happened. Sometime in the early hours, Janie Doyle Dylan, my wife and my soul, slipped into a final coma. Her death was inevitable now. She might linger a few days or a few weeks, but she would not regain consciousness.

Nor would there be any extraordinary efforts to hold her here. She had always been a bold spirit. And as her sturdy little body failed her and her time in this world became shorter and less endurable, she'd grown impatient. Ready for her Next Great Adventure. Eager for it, I think.

And now she was almost on her way. Already on board, waiting for takeoff. And I was left in the terminal, unable to do anything but watch her go. And so help me God, if not for the boys, I would have gone with her.

But I did not have that option. After calling my sister-in-law to update her on Janie's condition, I headed home to pack a few things. I'd already made arrangements to share Janie's room at the hospice for this final time.

But as soon as I stepped in our front door, I knew something was wrong. The furnace was roaring and I could feel a chilly draft from the rear of the house. I hurried through to the den. And found it open to weather. The picture window had been smashed, glittering glass splinters were scattered all over the room. Stunned, I looked around for a rock or . . .

A crossbow bolt was stuck in the den wall. Titanium. Its broadhead buried just above a smiling photograph of Janie and the boys. Along the way it had knocked down the easel holding a watercolor painting of the backyard Janie had been working on. Her last painting. Unfinished. And now it always would be.

I knelt to retrieve the painting, but didn't rise. Stayed there awhile, just holding it. It wasn't very good. Janie daubed away with more enthusiasm than skill. But she loved doing it. The arrow had slashed the picture, slitting it open as it ripped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through. I flipped the painting over. On the back, on the pristine canvas, the faint smudges were obvious. Blue chalk.

I rose slowly, carefully replacing the watercolor on its easel. Considered calling the police. But I could almost hear Wolinski. "Just because a man owns a crossbow doesn't make him guilty. Mr. Sinclair owns a lot of things."

Including the local police.

Janie was right, this was a true Hitler test. Letting it pass wouldn't mollify Sinclair, it would only make him bolder. Like leaving a rabid dog running loose in a neighborhood full of children. My children. My neighbors' children.

If evil is staring you in the face and you turn away and fail to act, then Dachau or Darfur or whatever follows is on your head. I knew I was moving into dangerous territory. I desperately needed to talk it through with Janie, but I couldn't. She'd been my rock, my love, and my life for nine short years. Long enough to know I could never be sure what she might do in a given situation. Especially not one as treacherous as this.

But I knew one thing for certain. She wouldn't have let this pass. And neither could I.

Enough.

Trotting upstairs to the attic, I rummaged around for a particular cardboard box. And found it. It held my father's old Remington shotgun. A Kmart special, Model 870, common as dirt. I hadn't fired it since I was a boy. My mom shipped it to me after the old man's funeral, years ago. But with little kids in the house, I'd simply stored it away.

No one in Algoma knew I even owned a gun and I'd watched enough *CSI* to know shotgun pellets are impossible to trace.

And like the man said, hunting accidents happen all the time.

Keeping the gun mostly concealed beneath my coat, I trotted across the field behind my house. Following the faint remains of Sparky's blood trail. Once I reached the bushes on the far side, I didn't bother to hide the weapon anymore. Amid the falling leaves of an October autumn, a man with a gun is unremarkable. Grouse season, deer season, rabbit season. All that's required is a taste for wild game and a hunting license.

And maybe there was something to what Sinclair said about men being natural predators. Moving through the woods, carrying my father's old gun, other afternoons came back to me. Half-forgotten memories of walking with my dad on golden afternoons like this one, in the sweet silence of the forest. The old man patiently explaining the art of the hunt. How the depth and span of a deer's hoofprint reveals its size and weight. How the texture of the soil can tell you whether a track is fresh or not, and how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

many hours since the animal passed through. How to use the wind to mask your movements and your scent.

In a way it was like slipping on a comfortable suit of old clothes I hadn't worn for a long time. But I didn't kid myself. Remembering a few boyhood ploys didn't make me an expert. I was in Sinclair's territory now and the murderous cripple was a proficient, highly skilled killer, much better at this game than I ever would be. I'd have to move very carefully. And keep my elbows up.

I checked my watch. Nearly three. Most deer hunters favor first and last light, early morning, late afternoon. Sinclair could be along any time now. If he wasn't here already.

With his shooting blind destroyed, he'd need a new spot. And it would have to be close-by, somewhere near the deer trail. Starting from the old blind site, I began circling, looking for wheelchair tracks. And a likely spot for an ambush.

It wasn't hard to find. The power wheelchair limited his choices to high, firm ground. His new lair was in a low clump of young cedars with a few boughs cut and rearranged into a crude shooting box. Not as cozy as his earlier blind, but not half bad.

Crouched in his chair, Sinclair would be nearly invisible in there. The cedars would mask his scent and movements, and a long stretch of the deer trail would be well within the lethal range of his crossbow. A perfect spot for a killing. One way or another.

Backing away from the cluster of cedars, I began scouting for a nest of my own, cover that would conceal me but still give me a shot at Sinclair's lair. Couldn't find one immediately, and as the trees began to thin, I realized I was approaching the edge of the forest again.

Through the thinning stands of aspens I glimpsed my house. And the shattered window. The bastard must have fired from here. . . . No. He couldn't have. The angle was all wrong. The bolt would have stuck in the opposite wall.

Curious now, I began circling the edge of woods, looking for a second blind, or at least a spot that would line up with the smashed window and the bolt in our den wall.

And I found it. Perhaps forty yards along, I came upon a narrow access road, wide enough for a car or a pickup truck. Or a wheelchair. Probably used by the groundskeepers to bring their lawnmowers to the field.

This was the spot. I was now facing our den window straightaway. Fired from this angle, the crossbow bolt would shatter the den window and lodge . . .

No, not here, either. The house was too far off now, two hundred yards or more. A crossbow could shoot that far, but Sinclair would have to tilt his weapon upward to compensate for the distance. If it had been fired from anywhere near here, the bolt would have been dropping sharply when it crashed through the window. Lodg-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing in the floor, not the wall.

Sinclair must have gotten closer somehow. No problem. There were enough bushes to offer concealment for a cautious stalker, especially one crouched in a chair.

But he obviously hadn't come this way. The earth was moist and spongy. Much too soft to support the weight of Sinclair's wheelchair without leaving deep gouges. I knelt, scanning the ground closely for wheel tracks. No sign of any. But I did find tracks.

Footprints. Moving carefully, I traced the faint impressions to a small clump of underbrush at the edge of the field bordering the subdivision. The perfect spot. Easing down onto the moist earth, my elbows came to rest in two nearly invisible depressions. Steadying my weapon, I aimed it across the field. Directly at the shattered window of my own home.

I lay there for a time, thinking. Rethinking, actually. Applying a different template over the same set of facts. And realized I wasn't dealing with a Hitler problem at all. More like a class struggle. Between the haves and the have-nots.

Any of a half-dozen Shakespearean plots dealt with this situation. *Macbeth,* for one. But there was nothing academic about this problem. The trap was very real, artfully laid. And I had blundered right into the middle of the killing zone. Like a lamb to the slaughter.

He could already have me centered in his sights, his finger poised on the crossbow's hair trigger. Ready to touch off that high-tech replica of medieval weaponry and slam a fletched shaft into me. The same way he killed Sparky.

No! I still didn't have it right. I didn't have to die for the plan to work. But my being out here made everything all too easy. And it would happen very quickly now.

Scrambling to my feet, I sprinted back into the forest, running flat out. Modern crossbows are lighter than the originals and their sights are deadly accurate, but they're still too bulky to swing quickly. My only chance was to keep moving. Fast.

Forty yards into the forest, I flattened myself against an aspen, panting, expecting a crossbow bolt to punch into my guts at any second. But it didn't. And as the moments passed, I gradually slowed my breathing, willing myself to calm down.

Listening.

Somewhere nearby I could hear the faint hum of Sinclair's power wheelchair, and I knew I only had a few moments left.

Glimpsing him coming through the trees, I edged toward the sound of the chair, keeping low. But not low enough, not for a born hunter. The chair stopped.

"Come out of there," Sinclair barked.

I stepped onto the path. His crossbow was mounted on a swivel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

attached to the chair. Centered on my heart, as near as I could tell. His sister was with him, both of them dressed in woodland military camouflage, ready for war.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Looking for you," I said.

"He's got a gun, Chan," Dana said, moving up behind the chair.

"I see that," Sinclair said. "Hunting, Professor?"

"Listen to me, Sinclair, this may sound crazy—"

"Kill him!" Dana hissed.

"What?" Chan said, stunned. "Are you off your rocker? He's—"

"He's here to kill us, you moron!" Grabbing the crossbow, she wrestled it out of her brother's hands. Easily. Despite his bearish appearance, Chan obviously had very little manual strength. As she struggled to bring it to bear, I raised my shotgun—

"Hold it," Jerry Landry shouted, his pistol at the ready. "Drop that gun, Dylan. Everybody just calm down half a second."

"He knows," Dana said, nodding at me.

"Knows what?" Chan Sinclair said, baffled. "What's going on here?"

"They're lovers, Sinclair. They mean to kill you. With you gone, Dana will inherit—"

"Shut your mouth!" Landry roared, raising his pistol to cover me.

I started inching backward.

"Don't even think about it," Landry warned.

"You're the one who needs to think, Jerry," I said, swallowing. "Your story only works if I'm killed with a crossbow."

True or not, the thought froze him for a second. And I was off, sprinting into the trees as Dana sent a crossbow shaft whistling through the spot where I'd been standing a moment before. Landry's shot followed a split-second later. Plan or no plan, they had to kill me now.

"Grab his shotgun," Landry roared at her as he charged into the brush after me. "Do your brother!"

I kept moving, dodging from tree to tree as Landry came on, firing at me wildly, gaining ground as I ducked this way and that, trying to keep trees between us. Knowing I wasn't going to make it. I was running out of cover. The trees were thinning out as we neared the edge of the wood and I'd have no chance at all in the open—Someone screamed behind us. A woman, I thought, but couldn't be certain. It barely sounded human.

"Dana!" Landry shouted, freezing in his tracks, scanning the woods, trying to spot me. I stayed put, a poplar at my back. The last tree big enough to use for cover.

"Dana!" No answer. Only a bubbling moan.

"My God!" Landry wheeled, sprinting back to the clearing. I turned too, running parallel, trying to keep him in sight. If I could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

get deeper into the forest—Landry stopped suddenly, raising his weapon. I froze too, but it was too late! He had me dead to rights, caught in the open, flatfooted. My only chance was to—but suddenly Landry lowered his pistol . . .

He turned toward me, a look of utter amazement on his face. And even at that distance I could see the feathered butt of a crossbow bolt protruding from his chest below the armpit. And the crimson circle widening around it as he dropped slowly to his knees. For a moment he desperately tried to pull the shaft out with this free hand, then pitched forward, sprawling facedown in the golden leaves.

Dead? Couldn't tell from here. Had no idea where the arrow came from or who shot it. From that angle, it could have been meant for me.

Keeping low, I circled warily around to Landry's crumpled form, coming up behind him. Ready to bolt at the slightest move. But he wasn't moving. Wasn't breathing, either. I reached carefully around for the service revolver still in his fist.

"Leave it," Sinclair said, humming his wheelchair into the clearing. His crossbow was back in its mount, loaded, and centered on my chest. Beyond him I could see the crumpled form of his sister, cowering against a tree, clutching her arm.

"What happened?" I asked, rising slowly.

"Dana tried to pick up the shotgun. I ran her down with the chair. I think her arm is broken. And you've got some explaining to do. Why did you come out here? With that gun?"

I thought about lying to him. Something in his eyes told me not to.

"I came to have it out with you. To kill you, if it came down to it."

"Over your dog?" he said, disbelieving. "I told you I didn't shoot it."

"It was more than that. Landry and your sister were planning to get rid of you and lay the blame on me. To make it work, they vandalized my home, and one of them, probably Landry, fired a crossbow bolt through my den window. It could have killed somebody. And it was dusted with blue chalk."

"Dana, most likely. I taught her to shoot a few years ago. Thought hunting might make her more self-sufficient. It didn't, though. Some people don't have what it takes to cut it in this world."

I couldn't tell if the irony was intended or not. "What happens now?"

"A hunting accident," Chan said coolly. "Poor Jerry stumbled into my line of fire, got himself killed. His family will collect a nice settlement, the department will avoid a scandal, and my sister will stay out of jail."

"She meant to kill you."

"She's still my sister. My responsibility."

"What about me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing about you, Dylan. You were never here. Any problem with that?"

"No. I've got troubles of my own."

"So I understand. I made a few calls about you after your visit the other day. I'm sorry about your wife."

"So am I. I have to get back. Do you : . . need anything from me?"

"Take your gun with you, it'll save me some explaining. Do you have a cell phone with you?"

"No."

"Neither do I. I hate the damned things, especially in the forest. Ruins the atmosphere. When you get home, would you call nine-one-one for me? Just tell them where I am. I'll take it from there."

"You can't really believe you'll get away with this."

"Sure I will. I can handle Stan Wolinski, and as for the rest, well, I'm used to coping. Been doing it all my life. No choice. When I tell people I'm not really handicapped, I'm dead serious."

"Yes," I said. "I can see that now."

Retrieving my gun, I headed out, half expecting a crossbow bolt in the back with every step. But it didn't happen.

When I glanced back, Sinclair was where I left him. A half-man with withered legs and barely functional arms, sitting in his chair ten yards from the corpse of a man he'd killed. Talking quietly to his sister, enjoying the afternoon sun.

He was right. Despite the chair, he really wasn't handicapped. He could cope.

And if he could do it, maybe I could too.

I was losing my wife. But not forever. I believe in a hereafter. I will see her again.

Meanwhile, I have our sons to raise. And maybe some growing up to do myself.

As I left the woods, I noticed an eagle circling high in the autumn sky. Free and magnificent. A pure predator. Like Chan Sinclair. Or like most of us when you rough away the veneer of civility.

Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. As I scanned the trail ahead, my vision seemed sharper, my senses more alert. For danger. Or prey.

Perhaps it will fade after a few weeks back in the classroom. If I let it. But I don't think I will.

Someday soon, I'm going to bring my sons out here, to show them the countryside their mother loved so much.

And I'll teach them to hunt. With a camera or a weapon, their choice. I'll teach them to move silently, and listen. And track. And show them whitetail bucks battling over turf. And foxes stalking rabbits, and soaring hawks scanning the fields for mice.

I'll show them how the world really works.

So that later on, if they happen to meet Hitler? They'll know exactly what to do. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Bridge Too Far

by Zoë Sharp

I watched with a kind of horrified fascination as the boy climbed onto the narrow parapet. Below his feet the elongated brick arches of the old viaduct stretched, so I'd been told, exactly one hundred and twenty-three feet to the ground. He balanced on the crumbling brickwork at the edge, casual and unconcerned.

My God, I thought, *he's going to do it. He's actually going to jump.*

"Don't prat around, Adam," one of the others said. I was still sorting out their names. Paul, that was it. He was a medical student, tall and bony with a long, almost Roman nose. "If you're going to do it, do it, or let someone else have their turn."

"Now, now," Adam said, wagging a finger, "don't be bitchy."

Paul glared at him, took a step forward, but the cool blond-haired girl, Diana, put a hand on his arm.

"Leave him alone, Paul," Diana said, and there was a faint snap to her voice. She'd been introduced as Adam's girlfriend, so I suppose she had the right to be protective. "He'll jump when he's ready. You'll have your chance to impress the newbies."

She flicked unfriendly eyes in my direction as she spoke, but I didn't rise to it. Heights didn't draw or repel me the way I knew they did with most people, but that didn't mean I was inclined to throw myself off a bridge to prove my courage. I'd already done that at enough other times, in enough other places.

Beside me, my friend Sam muttered under his breath, "Okay, I'm impressed. No way are you getting me up there."

I grinned at him. It was Sam who'd told me about the local Dangerous Sports Club, who trekked out to this disused viaduct in the middle of nowhere. There they tied one end of a rope to the far parapet and brought the other end up underneath between the supports before tying it round their ankles.

Zoë Sharp's writing career took off in 2001 with the publication, in the U.K., of the first book in her Charlie Fox series, *Killer Instinct.* The series was later picked up by St. Martin's Press in the U.S., with the sixth book, *Second Shot,* due in September '07. Ms. Sharp describes Fox, who appears in this story, as "tough, self-sufficient . . . with a slightly shady military background . . ."

©2007 by Zoë Sharp

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And then they jumped.

The idea, as Sam explained it, was to propel yourself outwards as though diving off a cliff and trying to avoid the rocks below. I suspected this wasn't an analogy with resonance for either of us, but the technique ensured that when you reached the end of your tether, so to speak, the slack was taken up progressively and you swung backwards and forwards under the bridge in a graceful arc.

Jump straight down, however, and you would be jerked to a stop hard enough to break your spine. They used modern climbing rope with a fair amount of give in it, but it was far from the elastic gear required by the bungee jumper. That was for wimps.

Sam knew the group's leader, Adam Lane, from the nearby university, where Sam was something incomprehensible to do with computers and Adam was the star of the track-and-field team. He was one of those magnetic golden boys who breezed effortlessly through life, always looking for a greater challenge, something to set their heartbeats racing. And for Adam, the unlikely pastime of bridge swinging, it seemed, was it.

I hadn't believed Sam's description of the activity and had made the mistake of expressing my scepticism out loud. So here I was on a bright but surprisingly nippy Sunday morning in May, waiting for the first of these lunatics to launch himself into the abyss.

Now, though, Adam put his hands on his hips and breathed in deep, looking around with a certain intensity at the landscape. His stance, up there on the edge of the precipice, was almost a pose.

We were halfway across the valley floor, in splendid isolation. The tracks to this Brunel masterpiece had been long since ripped up and carted away. The only clue to their existence was the footpath that led across the fields from the lay-by on the road where Sam and I had left our motorbikes. The other cars there, I guessed, belonged to Adam and his friends.

The view from the viaduct was stunning, the sides of the valley curving away at either side as though seen through a fish-eye lens. It was still early, so that the last of the dawn mist clung to the dips and hollows, and it was quiet enough to hear the world turning.

"Hello there! Not starting without us, are you?" called a girl's cheery voice, putting a scatter of crows to flight, breaking the spell. A flash of annoyance passed across Adam's handsome features.

A young couple was approaching. Like the other three DSC members, they were wearing high-tech outdoor clothing—lightweight trousers you can wash and dry in thirty seconds, and lairy-coloured fleeces.

The boy was short and muscular, a look emphasised by the fact he'd turned his coat collar up against the chill, giving him no neck to speak of. He tramped onto the bridge and almost threw his rucksack down with the others.

"What's the matter, Michael?" Adam said, his voice a lazy taunt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Get out of bed on the wrong side?"

The newcomer gave him a single vicious look and said nothing.

The girl was shorter and plumper than Diana. Her gaze flicked nervously from one to the other, latching onto the rope already secured round Adam's legs as if glad of the distraction. "Oh, *Adam,* you're never jumping today, are you?" she cried. "I didn't think you were supposed to—"

"I'm perfectly okay, Izzy darling," Adam drawled. His eyes shifted meaningfully towards Sam and me, then back again.

Izzy opened her mouth to speak, closing it again with a snap as she caught on. Her pale complexion bloomed into sudden pink across her cheekbones and she bent to fuss with her own rucksack. She drew out a stainless-steel flask and held it up like an offering. "I brought coffee."

"How very thoughtful of you, Izzy dear," Diana said, speaking down her well-bred nose at the other girl. "You always were so very accommodating."

Izzy's colour deepened. "I'm not sure there's enough for everybody," she went on, dogged. She nodded apologetically to us. "No one told me there'd be new people coming. I'm Izzy, by the way."

"Sam Pickering," Sam put in, "and this is Charlie Fox."

Izzy smiled a little shyly, then a sudden thought struck her. "You're not thinking of joining, are you?" she said in an anxious tone. "Only, it's not certain we're going to carry on with the club for much longer."

"'Course we are," Michael said brusquely, raising his dark, stubbled chin out of his collar for the first time. "Just because Adam has to give up, no reason for the rest of us to pack it in. We'll manage without him."

The others seemed to hold their breath while they checked Adam's response to this dismissive declaration, but he seemed to have lost interest in the squabbles of lesser mortals. He continued to stand on the parapet, untroubled by the yawning drop below him, staring into the middle distance like an ocean sailor.

"That's not the only reason we might have to stop," the tall bony boy, Paul, said. "In fact, here comes another right now."

He nodded across the far side of the field. We all turned, and I noticed for the first time that a man on a red Honda quad bike was making a beeline for us across the dewy grass.

"Oh shit," Michael muttered. "Wacko Jacko. That's all we need."

"Who is he?" Sam asked, watching the purposeful way the quad was bearing down on us.

"He's the local farmer," Paul explained. "He owns all the land round here and he's dead against us using the viaduct, but it's a public right of way and legally he can't stop us. That doesn't stop the old bugger coming and giving us a hard time every Sunday."

"Mr. Jackson's a strict Methodist, you see," Izzy said quietly as the quad drew nearer. "It's not trespassing that's the problem—it's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the fact that when the boys jump, well, they do tend to swear a bit. I think he objects to the blasphemy."

I eyed the farmer warily as he finally braked to a halt at the edge of the bridge and cut the quad's engine. The main reason for my caution was the elderly double-barrelled Baikal shotgun he lifted out of the rack on one side and brought with him.

Jackson came stumping along the bridge towards us with the kind of rolling, twitching gait that denotes a pair of totally worn-out knees. He wore a flat cap with tar on the peak and a tatty raincoat tied together with orange bailer twine. As he closed on us he snapped the Baikal shut, and I instinctively edged myself slightly in front of Sam.

"Morning, Mr. Jackson," Izzy called, the tension sending her voice into a high waver.

The farmer ignored the greeting, his eyes fixed on Adam. It was only when Michael and Paul physically blocked his path that he seemed to notice the rest of us.

"I've told you lot before. You've no right to do this on my land," he said gruffly, clutching the shotgun almost nervously, as though suddenly aware he was outnumbered. "You been warned."

"And you've been told that *you* have no right to stop us, you daft old bugger," Adam said, the derision clear in his voice.

Jackson's ruddy face congested. He tried to push closer to Adam, but Paul caught the lapel of his raincoat and shoved him backwards. With a fraction less aggression, the whole thing could have passed off with a few harsh words, but after this there was only one way it was going to go.

The scuffle was brief. Jackson was hard and fit from years of manual labour, but the boys both had thirty years on him. It was the shotgun that worried me the most. Michael had grabbed hold of the barrel and was trying to wrench it from the farmer's grasp, while *he* was determined to keep hold of it. The business end of the Baikal swung wildly across the rest of us.

Izzy was shrieking, ducked down with her hands over her ears. I piled Sam backwards, starting to head for the end of the bridge.

The blast of the shotgun discharging stopped my breath. I flinched at the pellets twanging off the brickwork as the shot spread. The echo rolled away up and down the valley like a call to battle.

The silence that followed was quickly broken by Izzy's whimpering cries. She was still on the ground, staring in horrified disbelief at the blood seeping through a couple of small holes in the leg of her trousers.

Paul crouched near to her, hands fluttering over the wounds without actually wanting to touch them. Sam had turned vaguely green at the first sign of blood, but he unwound the cotton scarf from under the neck of his leathers and handed it over to me without a word. I moved Paul aside quietly and padded the makeshift

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dressing onto Izzy's leg.

"It's only a couple of pellets," I told her. "It's not serious. Hold this against it as hard as you can. You'll be fine."

Michael had managed to wrestle the Baikal away from Jackson. He turned and took in Izzy's state, then pointed the shotgun meaningfully back at the shaken farmer, settling his finger onto the second trigger. "You bastard," he ground out.

"Michael, stop it," Diana said.

Michael ignored her, his dark eyes fixed menacingly on Jackson. "You've just shot my girlfriend."

"Michael!" Diana tried again, shouting this time. She had quite a voice for one so slender. "Stop it! Don't you understand? *Where's Adam?"*

We all turned then, looked back to the section of parapet where he'd been standing. The lichen-covered wall was peppered with tiny fresh chips, but the parapet itself was empty.

Adam was gone.

I ran to the edge and leaned out over it as far as I dared. A hundred and twenty-three feet below me, a crumpled form lay utterly still on the grassy slope. The blood was a bright halo around his head.

"Adam!" Diana yelled, her voice cracking. "Oh God. Can you hear me?"

I stepped back, caught Sam's enquiring glance, and shook my head.

Paul was already hurrying towards the end of the bridge to pick his way down beneath the arches. I went after him, snagged his arm as he started his descent.

"I'll go," I said. When he looked at me dubiously, I added, "I know first-aid if there's anything to be done, and if not, well—" I shrugged—"I've seen dead bodies before."

His face was grave for a moment, then he nodded. "What can we do?"

"Get an ambulance—Izzy probably needs one even if Adam doesn't—and call the police." He nodded again and had already started back up the slope when I added, "Oh, and try not to let Michael shoot that bloody farmer."

"Why not?" Paul demanded bitterly. "He deserves it." And then he was gone.

It was a relatively easy path down to where Adam's body lay. Close to, it wasn't particularly pretty. I hardly needed to search for a pulse at his outflung wrist to know the boy was dead. Still, the relatively soft surface had kept him largely intact, enough for me to tell that it wasn't any shotgun blast that had killed him. Gravity had done that all by itself.

I took off my jacket and gently laid it over the top half of the body, covering his head. It was the only thing I could do for him,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and even that was more to protect the sensibilities of the living.

When I looked up, I could see half of the rope dangling from the opposite side of the bridge high above my head, its loose end swaying gently. The other end was still tied around Adam's ankles. It had snapped during his fall, but why?

Had Jackson's shot severed the rope at the moment when Adam had either lost his balance and fallen, or as he'd chosen to jump?

I got to my feet and followed the rope along the ground to where the severed end lay coiled in the grass. I used a twig to carefully lift it up enough to examine it.

And then I knew.

The embankment seemed a hell of a lot steeper on the way up than it had on the way down. I ran all the way and was totally out of breath by the time I regained the bridge. But I was just in time.

Diana was crouched next to Izzy, holding her hand. Paul and Sam were standing a few feet behind Michael, eyeing him with varying amounts of fear and mistrust. The thickset youth had the shotgun wedged up under Jackson's chin, using it to force his upper body backwards over the top of the parapet. Michael's face was blenched with anger, teetering on the edge of control.

"He's dead, isn't he?" He didn't take his eyes off the farmer as I approached.

"Yes," I said carefully, "but Jackson didn't kill him, Michael."

"But he must have done." It was Paul who spoke. "We all saw—"

"You saw nothing," I cut in. "The gun went off and Adam either jumped or fell, but he wasn't shot. The rope gave out. That's why he's dead."

"That's ridiculous," Diana said, haughty rather than anguished. "The breaking strain on the ropes we use is enormous. No way could it have simply broken. The shot must have hit it."

"It didn't," I said. "It was cut halfway through. With a knife."

Even Michael reacted to that one, taking the shotgun away from Jackson's neck as he swivelled round to face me. I could see the indentations the barrels had left in the scrawny skin of the old man's throat.

Chances like that don't come very often. I took a quick step closer, looped my arm over the one of Michael's that held the gun, and brought my elbow back sharply into the fleshy vee between his ribs.

He doubled over, gasping, letting go of the weapon. I picked it out of his hands and stepped back again. It was all over in a moment.

The others watched in silence as I broke the Baikal and picked out the remaining live cartridge. Once it was unloaded I put the gun down propped against the brickwork and dropped the cartridge into my pocket. Michael had caught his breath enough to think about coming at me, but it was Sam who intervened.

"I wouldn't if you know what's good for you," he said, his voice kindly. "Charlie's a bit of an expert at this type of thing. She'd eat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you for breakfast."

Michael favoured me with a hard stare. I returned it flat and level. I don't know what he thought he saw, but he backed off, sullen, rubbing his stomach.

"So," I said, "the question is, who cut Adam's rope?"

For a moment there was total silence. "Look, we either have this out now, or you get the third degree when the police arrive," I said, shrugging. "I assume you *did* call them?" I added in Paul's direction.

"No, but I did," Sam said, brandishing his mobile phone. "They're on their way. I've said I'll wait for them upon the road. Show them the way. Will you be okay down here?"

I nodded. "I'll cope," I said. "Oh and, Sam—when they arrive, tell them it looks like murder."

Nobody spoke as Sam started out across the field. He eyed the quad bike with some envy as he passed, but went on foot.

"I still say the old bastard deserves shooting," Michael muttered.

"I didn't do nothing," Jackson blurted out suddenly. Relieved of the immediate threat to his life, he stood looking dazed with his shoulders slumped. "I never would have fired. It was him who grabbed my hand! He's the one who forced my finger down on the trigger!"

He waved towards Michael, who flushed angrily at the charge. I replayed the scene again and recalled the way the stocky boy had been struggling with Jackson for control of the gun. It had looked for all the world like a genuine skirmish, but it could just as easily have been a convenient setup.

When no one immediately spoke up in his defence, Michael rounded on us. "How can you believe anything so *stupid?*" he bit out. "Adam was a good mate. I would have given him my last cent."

"Didn't like sharing your girlfriend with him, though, did you?" Paul said quietly.

Izzy, still lying on the ground, gave an audible gasp. I checked to see how Diana was taking the news of her dead boyfriend's apparent infidelity, but there was little to be gleaned from her cool and colourless expression.

A brief spasm of what might have been fear passed across Michael's face. "You can't believe I'd want to kill him for that?" he said and gave a harsh laugh. "Defending Izzy's honour? Come on! I knew right from the start that she's not exactly choosy."

Izzy had begun to cry. "He loved me," she managed between sobs, and it wasn't immediately clear if she was referring to Michael or Adam. "He told me he loved me."

Diana sat back, still looking at Izzy, but without really seeing her. "That's what he tells—told—all of them," she said, almost to herself. "Wanted to hear them say it back to him, I suppose." She smiled then, a little sadly. "Adam always did need to be adored. The centre of attention."

"You're just saying that, but it isn't true," Izzy cried. "He loved

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me. He was going to give you up but he wanted to let you down gently, not to hurt your feelings. He was just waiting for the right time."

"Oh, Izzy, of course he wasn't going to give me up," Diana said, her tone one of great patience, as though talking to the very young, or the very slow. "He used to come straight from your bed back to mine and tell me all about it." She laughed, a high brittle peal. "How desperately keen you were. How eager to please."

"And you didn't *mind?*" I asked, fighting to keep the disbelief and the distaste buried.

"Of course not," Diana said, sounding vaguely surprised that I should feel the need to ask. She sighed. "Adam had some—interesting—tastes. There were some things that I simply drew the line at, but Izzy—" her eyes slipped away from mine to skim dispassionately over the girl lying cringing in front of her—"well, she would do just about anything he asked. Pathetic, really."

"Are you really trying to tell me that you *knew* your boyfriend was sleeping around and you didn't care at all?"

Diana stood, looked down her nose again in that way she had. The way that indicated I was being too bourgeois for words. "Naturally," she said. "I understood Adam perfectly and I understood that this was his last fling at life while he still had the chance."

"What do you mean, while he still had the chance?" I said. I recalled Michael's jibe about Adam having to pack in the dangerous sports. "What was the matter with him?"

There was a long pause. Even Jackson, I noticed, seemed to be waiting intently for the answer. Eventually, Izzy was the one who broke the silence. "He only told us a month ago that he'd been diagnosed with MND," she said. Her leg had just about stopped bleeding, but her face had started to sweat now as the pain and the shock crept in. When I looked blank, it was Paul who continued.

"Motor Neuron Disease," he said, sounding authoritative. "It's a progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord. In most cases the mind is unaffected, but you gradually lose control of various muscle groups—the arms and legs are usually the first to go. You can never quite tell how far or how fast it will develop because it affects everyone in a different way. Sometimes you lose the ability to speak and swallow. It was such rotten luck! The chances of it happening in someone under forty are so remote, but for it to hit Adam of all people—" He broke off, shook his head, and seemed to remember how none of that mattered anymore. "Poor sod."

"It was a tragedy," Izzy said, defiant. "And if I gave him pleasure while he could still take it, what was wrong with that?"

"So," I murmured, "was this a murder, or a mercy killing?"

Diana made a sort of snuffling noise then, bringing one hand up to her face. For a moment I thought she was fighting back tears, but then she looked up and I saw that it was laughter. And she'd lost the battle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh for God's sake, Adam didn't have Motor Neuron Disease!" she cried, jumping to her feet, hysteria bubbling up through the words. "That was all a lie! He *wanted* you to think of him as the tragic hero, struck down at the pinnacle of his youth. And you all fell for it. All of you!"

Paul's face was blank. "So there was nothing wrong with him?" he said faintly. "But he said—"

"Adam was diagnosed HIV positive six months ago," Diana said flatly. "He had AIDS."

The dismay rippled through the group like the bore of a changing tide. AIDS. The bogeyman of the modern age. I almost saw them edge away from each other, as though afraid of cross-contamination. No wonder Adam had preferred the pretence of a more user-friendly affliction.

And then it dawned on them, one by one.

Izzy realised it first. "Oh my God," she whispered. "He never used . . ." she broke off, lifting her tear-stained face to Michael. "Oh God," she said again. "I am *so* sorry."

Michael caught on then, reeling away to clutch at the bridge parapet as though his legs suddenly wouldn't support him any longer.

Paul was just standing there, staring at nothing. "Bastard," he muttered, over and over.

Michael rounded on him in a burst of fury. "It's all right for you," he yelled. "You're probably the only one of us who hasn't got it!"

"Ah, that's not quite the case, is it, Paul?" Diana said, her voice like chiselled ice. "Always had a bit of a thing for Adam, didn't you? But he wasn't having any of that. Oh, he kept you dangling for years," she went on, scanning Paul's stunned face without compassion. "Did you really not wonder *at all* why he suddenly changed his mind recently?"

She laughed again. A sound like glass breaking, sharp and bitter. "No, I can see you didn't. You poor fools," she said, taking in all of their devastated faces, her voice mocking. "There you all were debasing yourselves to please him, hoping to bathe in a last little piece of Adam's reflected glory, when all the time he was spitting on your graves."

Michael lunged for her, reaching for her throat. I swept his legs out from under him before he'd taken a stride, then twisted an arm behind his back to hold him down once he was on the floor. *Come on, Sam! Where the hell were the police when you needed them?*

I looked up at Diana, who'd stood unconcerned during the abortive attack. "Why on earth did you stay with him?" I asked.

She shrugged. "By the time he confessed, it was too late," she said simply. "There's no doubt—I've had all the tests. Besides, you didn't know Adam. He was one of those people who was a bright star, for all his faults. I wanted to be with him, and you can't be infected twice."

"And what about us?" Paul demanded, sounding close to tears

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

himself. "We were your friends. Why didn't you tell us the truth?"

"Friends!" Diana scoffed. "What kind of friends would screw my boyfriend—or let their girlfriends screw him—behind my back? Answer me that!"

"You never got anything you didn't ask for," Jackson said quietly then, his voice rich with disgust. "The whole lot of you."

Privately, part of me couldn't help but agree with the farmer. "The question is," I said, "which one of you went for revenge?"

And then, across the field, a new-looking Toyota Land Cruiser turned off the road and came bowling across the grass, snaking wildly as it came.

"Oh shit," Paul muttered, "it's Adam's parents. How the hell did they get to hear about it so fast?"

The Land Cruiser didn't stop by the quad bike, but came thundering straight onto the bridge itself, heedless of the weight-bearing capabilities of the old structure. It braked jerkily to a halt and the middle-aged couple inside flung open the doors and jumped out.

"Where's Adam?" the man said urgently. He looked as though he'd thrown his clothes on in a great hurry. His shirt was unbuttoned and his hair awry. "Are we in time?"

None of the group spoke. I let go of Michael's wriggling body and got to my feet. "Mr. Lane?" I said. "I'm terribly sorry to tell you this, but there seems to have been an accident—"

"Accident?" Adam's mother almost shrieked the word as she came forwards. "Accident? What about this?" and she thrust a crumpled sheet of paper into my hands.

Uncertain what else to do, I unfolded the letter just as the first police Land Rover Discovery began its approach, rather more sedately, across the field.

Adam's suicide note was brief and to the point. He couldn't face the prospect of the future, it said. He couldn't face the dreadful responsibility of what he'd knowingly inflicted on his friends. He was sorry. Goodbye.

He did not, I noticed, express the hope that they would forgive him for what he'd done.

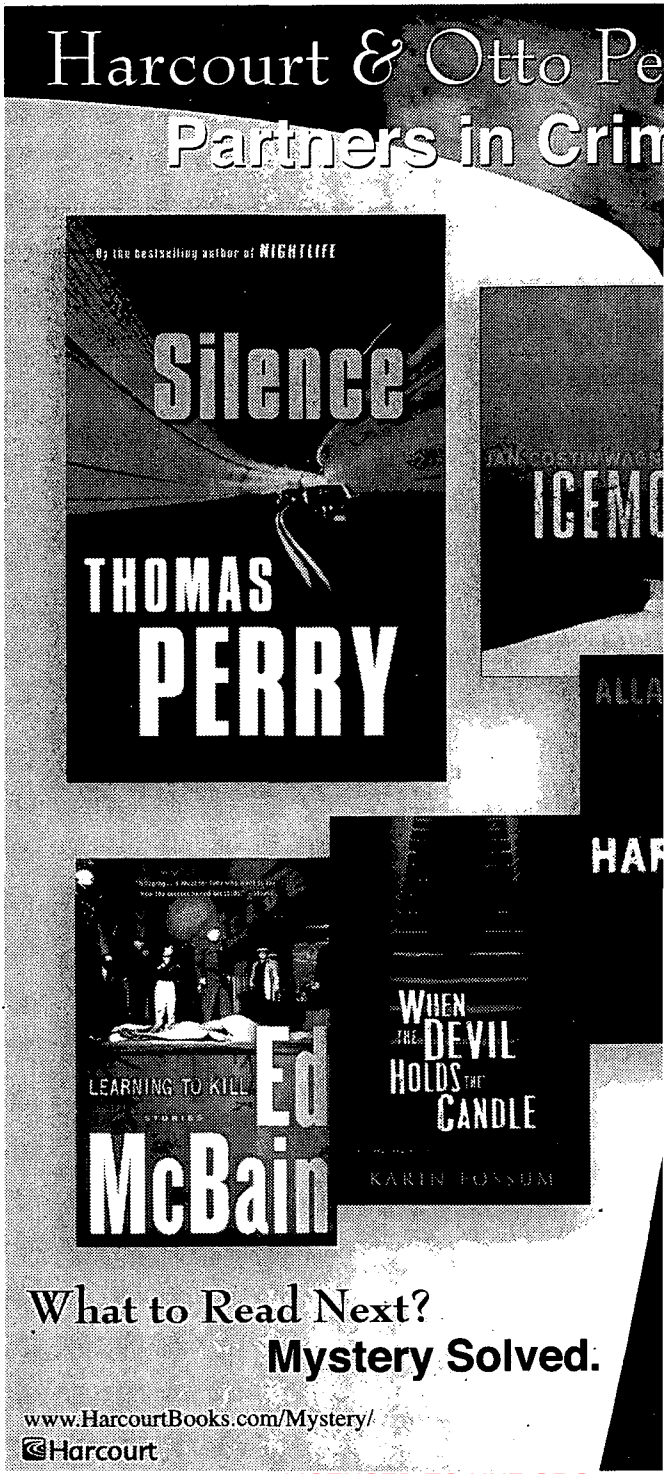
I folded the note up again as the lead Discovery reached us and a uniformed sergeant got out, adjusting his cap. Sam was in the passenger seat.

The sergeant advanced, his experienced gaze taking in the shotgun still leaning against the brickwork, Izzy's blood-soaked trousers, and the array of staggered faces.

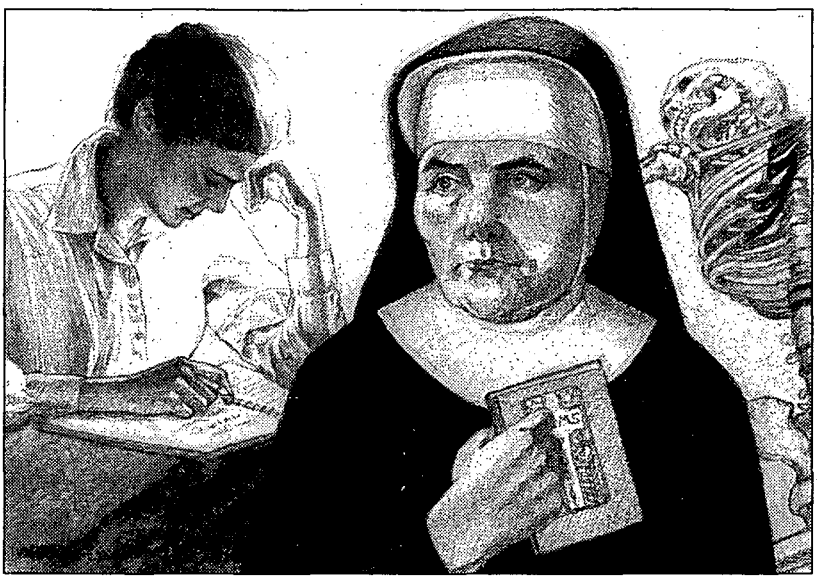
"I understand there's been a murder committed," he said, businesslike, glancing round. "Where's the victim?"

I waved my hand towards the surviving members of the Dangerous Sports Club. "Take your pick," I said. "And if you want the murderer, well—" I nodded at the parapet where Adam had taken his final dive—"you'll find him down there." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Laurie Harden

No Wick for the Rested

by Monica Quill

1.

"I don't know a thing about poetry," Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey said, and Kim and Jane exchanged a look. Such a disclaimer usually prefaced a lengthy lecture on the allegedly unknown subject. Their visitor stirred in her chair.

"What I really want to know is whether the college literary magazine has been preserved."

"Preserved?"

"There were bound copies in the college library, from the very first issue to . . ."

Hannah Fence's voice trailed off. The closing and subsequent sale of the college that the Order of Martha and Mary had once run in a northern suburb marked a dark day for many alumnae. For Emtee Dempsey, it had been almost apocalyptic. In those mad days when novelty was its own excuse, the past had been cast aside like a squeezed orange. The house on Walton Street in Chicago and a summer retreat in Indiana were all that remained of the once extensive property of the order. The three nuns were the remnant of a once thriving community.

©2007 by Monica Quill

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Preserving the past was not uppermost in many minds at that time. You are referring of course to *Fennel and Rue*?"

"Of course." Hannah sat back. "Where did they ever find that name for the magazine?"

"William Dean Howells, of course."

Neither Hannah nor Emtee Dempsey's housemates responded to this.

"You don't know William Dean Howells?" A shadow passed over the rounded countenance of the old nun, but in a moment it was gone. She put her fat little hands on the arms of her chair. "But enough. So you have made your debut as a poet, Hannah?"

Monica Quill is a pseudonym of mystery writer, mainstream novelist, and philosophy professor Ralph McInerny. The author's varied life is chronicled in his recently published autobiography *I Alone Have Escaped to Tell You: My Life and Pastimes* (University of Notre Dame Press). The Quill pseudonym is reserved for stories featuring Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey, who has not had a novel-length case since 1997. ✝

Hannah's small book of verse had recently been issued by a local press. Small books of verse are regularly issued by small presses and the usual fate is swift and sure oblivion. But Hannah's collection had known a surprising reception. A review in the *Sun Times* and a piece on the poet in the Sunday *Tribune* had created a demand for copies in bookstores throughout the region. It had actually gone into a second printing, the first run of 500 copies having sold out. That a woman in middle age had produced such fresh and haunting lyrics made it news indeed. She had brought a copy for the old nun, suitably inscribed.

"Are you at work on a second collection?"

"Sister, I don't think I could go through it all again."

"Perhaps some juvenilia?" The old nun's countenance suddenly brightened. "Is that the basis of your interest in *Fennel and Rue*? You did publish in it, didn't you?"

Hannah looked hurt. "Sister, I was editor in my senior year."

"Ah yes. I remember now. I should have thought you would have saved issues of the magazine."

"Only the odd ones. Perhaps if I had majored in history I would have realized how fragile the past . . . "

But Sister Mary Teresa was not listening. There was a far-off remembering look in her blue eyes. "Who was the girl who wrote such lovely poems? It must have been in your time."

"So many of us tried to write poetry, Sister."

"But this girl succeeded. Oh!" The little hands flew up. Delight gave way to dismay. "The girl who disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Kim cried.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Disappeared off the face of the earth. She didn't leave a trace."

"Catherine Raines," Hannah said softly. "Catherine Raines."

Over the next fifteen minutes, Emtee Dempsey recalled the facts of that long-ago episode in the college history. Hannah reluctantly corroborated the old nun's memory.

"We were classmates, Sister."

"Ah."

"I have a theory. During the days before her disappearance I was nagging her to submit a poem for the Cardinal Mundelein prize. You may remember that the Mundelein was the most prestigious prize of all."

"And Catherine never submitted a poem?"

Hannah shook her head. "Inspiration is an unreliable friend." Emtee Dempsey recognized the phrase from the *Tribune* interview. "She became almost desperate. The deadline came and went and Catherine had disappeared."

"A wise virgin is always supplied with the oil of inspiration."

Hannah blushed prettily. "Then you've already read it."

"It?"

"My book. One of the poems . . ."

"Just coincidence."

Eventually they got back to the subject of bound back issues of *Fennel and Rue.* The only hope Emtee Dempsey could offer was that there might possibly be a set in the attic and soon Jane took Hannah off to the attic.

"How could a student just disappear?" Kim asked.

Emtee Dempsey tipped her head to one side. "Admittedly, it was rare in those days, but given the veritable plague of disappearances in recent years I cannot understand your surprise. It is almost as if the Rapture had begun. Two men at work in the field, one is taken, one is left. Two women writing poetry in a college, one is taken, one is left."

"Is that a new translation?"

Emtee Dempsey looked stern. The constant flow of new translations of Scripture irked the old nun, and she was for banning them all.

"There are only two worthy English translations. The King James, precisely for its English, and the Douay-Rheims, for its closeness to the Latin vulgate. You realize that medievalists rely on the Douay-Rheims for just that reason. You must read the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in either of those translations."

"Tell me about Catherine Raines."

"You've already heard what is known. One day she was a student on campus, the next day she had vanished as if into thin air."

"But that's impossible."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Of course it's impossible. But it was never learned exactly what happened."

"What do you think of Hannah's theory?"

"It's possible."

"You're not serious. Disappear because she couldn't write a poem and win a prize?"

"Sister Kimberly, you were once that age, and not all that long ago. Of course it's possible. The scale of importance is proportionate to circumstances and age. I realize that you could dismiss the momentary loss of poetic inspiration . . ."

"I have never written a poem in my life!"

"You should try. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote poetry," she added piously.

"Have you ever written poetry?"

"You must wait for my autobiography."

Jane returned with Hannah empty-handed. Not only was there no bound set of the college literary magazine in the attic, there were not even loose copies of one issue or another.

"I can't believe they could disappear without a trace," Hannah said.

"Like Catherine Raines."

Hannah turned to Kim and seemed about to say something angry. But the moment passed.

"Like Catherine Raines," she repeated.

2.

Kim looked into the matter of the disappearance of Catherine Raines during the next several days, convincing herself that this was more or less in the line of duty. Her own research always took second place, of course, but how was she to operate as Sister Mary Teresa's research assistant if she did not . . . Well, it wasn't much of an argument but Kim was determined to find out about the girl who had disappeared into thin air.

The disappearance had been a three-day wonder in the Chicago papers and then subsided, giving way to other horrors and outrages. Kim wondered if the address given for the girl's parents could possibly still be valid. It wasn't. The current owner had no idea where Mrs. Raines had gone.

"Just Mrs. Raines?"

Kim gave the first name.

"Who did you say is calling?" The question was wary.

"I represent the college that Catherine Raines attended. We are trying to get in touch with our graduates."

"Why don't you ask at the St. Basil rectory?"

The house in which the Raineses had lived was in St. Basil parish, but great changes had taken place in the past few years. The church itself was as big as a basilica; it would have dwarfed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the cathedral downtown. The rectory was equally imposing, and there was a school and convent as well, conveying a period of remarkable growth in the church—a time of ethnic pride, with neighborhoods and parishes unabashedly devoted to one immigrant group or another.

The current pastor was black, a native of Nigeria. He looked at Kim with large soft eyes and when he realized that she was a nun, was even more courteous. Father Tzenga was here to preside over the slow demise of St. Basil's. There was now only one Sunday Mass in the huge church, and it was sparsely attended. The descendants of the original founders of the parish had fled to the suburbs. The parish school went on, taking the pressure off the local public school.

"The cardinal wants to close St. Basil's, Sister."

Kim wondered if the records of the parish would become as difficult to trace as those of their college. She told Father Tzenga that she was looking for a Mrs. Raines, a former member of the parish, who had lived at such and such an address. The priest just smiled at her.

"I have no idea."

"There are no records?"

"They would tell you the woman was a member of the parish. You already know that."

"But where would she have gone?"

"You must ask her children."

Kim stood. At the moment the dusty paths of medieval history seemed more promising than the recent history of the city of Chicago.

"You could ask at Little Flower," the priest suggested.

Little Flower was a nursing home two blocks away, run by the nuns who had once taught in St. Basil's school. Their patients were largely old parishioners. The place was bright and fragrant and happy. And when she asked for Mrs. Raines the answer was immediate.

"Ward B," the nun behind the counter said. She was peering at the cross pinned to Kim's lapel.

"The Order of Martha and Mary."

"Ah."

At the end of the corridor there was a large windowed room in which old people sat in wheelchairs, ignoring television, enjoying the sun, looking placidly out the windows at the neighborhood in which they had lived their lives. Mrs. Raines was a prim little woman in her eighties. Her silver hair seemed freshly shampooed, her color was good, and her eyes shone with intelligence. She listened to Kim's explanation of her visit as if her mornings were filled with such callers. But her daughter's name sent a swift look of pain across her face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But how is Sister Mary Teresa?"

"I should have brought her with me."

"You must do that next time."

"Tell me about your daughter."

Old Mrs. Raines looked at Kim. "I will soon be reunited with her."

When Kim returned to the house on Walton Street, Emtee Dempsey was in her study. A book was open in her hand. She lifted a hand and then read aloud.

> Ten wise maids with oil supplied
> When asked to share they all replied,
> The bridegroom comes, go buy your own.
> Does wisdom look to self alone?

She looked at Kim through her rimless glasses. "Now that is an interesting view of the scriptural parable."

"Hannah Fence?"

She waved the book in reply.

"What is the answer?"

"It wasn't selfishness but concern for the bridegroom."

"I have spoken with Catherine Raines's mother."

The old nun put down the book. "Tell me about it."

Kim recounted the visit with the thoroughness the old nun expected.

"You might mention it to Raymond."

Raymond was Kim's brother, a detective lieutenant in the Chicago police department.

"Are you serious?"

"Sister, I am always serious." But she smiled sweetly when she said it.

3.

The newspaper accounts of the disappearance of Catherine Raines stressed the mystery rather than suggesting any explanation. Hannah Fence, identified as the missing girl's best friend, was described as inconsolable. And there was a matter-of-fact quotation from history professor Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey: "A young woman does not simply disappear." One reporter sought possible motivations for Catherine simply to run away, but such curiosity died with the story. Within a week, Catherine Raines had disappeared from newspaper accounts much as she had disappeared from the campus.

At Emtee Dempsey's suggestion, Kim went to the little bookstore owned by Hannah Fence on Rush Street, where she found the poet in her office at the back of the store.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Any luck?" she asked Kim.

"I have talked with Mrs. Raines."

Two hands covered Hannah's mouth and rounded eyes looked over their fingertips. "She's still alive?"

"In the Little Flower nursing home."

"I must go see her."

Hannah's office was a pleasant place, three walls covered with bookshelves. It was here that she had been photographed by the *Tribune*. It was studying that photograph that had prompted Emtee Dempsey to ask Kim to visit the poet.

"The newspaper accounts are so dissatisfying."

"I know. Sister, it was the most frustrating event of my life. Catherine and I were very close. There was scarcely an issue of *Fennel and Rue* that did not contain something of hers while I was editor."

"And yet she couldn't come up with an entry for the Mundelein Prize."

"Inspiration is an unreliable friend." It might have been a mantra.

"Who won the prize that year?"

"I did! But what pleasure could I take in that after what had happened to Catherine?"

"It was good of you to dedicate your book to Catherine."

"It was the least I could do."

"I wonder if Catherine would have gone on writing poetry."

A clerk looked in to tell Hannah that a customer wanted her to autograph her little book of poems. She left the office with a pleased expression, excusing herself. Kim stood and examined the shelves in Hannah's office. She met the poet in the shop and thanked her for seeing her.

"Must you go?"

"I'm afraid so."

"When I went to Sister Mary Teresa I had the mad thought that, after all these years, she would solve the riddle of Catherine's disappearance."

"Perhaps she will."

"Why do you say that?"

"Out of blind loyalty."

After a moment, Hannah laughed. "How satisfying it must be to live with such a woman."

"That's what she tells me."

A little bell tinkled when Kim went out the street door. She could easily walk to the house on Walton Street and she did, wondering what Emtee Dempsey would make of the result of her visit to Hannah's bookstore.

"Well?" The old nun put down her huge fountain pen and looked at Kim.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You were right. She has a complete bound set of *Fennel and Rue* on the shelf in her office."

Emtee Dempsey took from a drawer the *Tribune* story on Hannah Fence the poet and studied the accompanying photograph. "I was sure that was what it was."

"What is the explanation?"

"I was about to ask you."

"Why would she claim to be searching for a set of the magazine when she already had one?"

"Oh, there are several possible explanations of that."

"Such as?"

"She wanted another set?"

"That's silly. So what other possible explanations are there?"

"Are you testing me?"

"I am simply asking a question."

"To which, no doubt, you have already devised an answer." Emtee Dempsey picked up her fountain pen and pulled toward her the page on which she had been writing her daily stint on her history of the twelfth century. Kim felt dismissed.

"You're just teasing."

But the study was filled with the scratching pen as it moved steadily across the page.

4.

Jane answered the door when Raymond called. He brushed past her and headed for the study.

"Is she in?"

Jane ran ahead of him to forewarn Emtee Dempsey of her visitor. Kim was with the old nun. Raymond came to a stop before the desk.

"Did you think you could keep it a secret forever?"

Emtee Dempsey looked at him over her rimless glasses. "You are the one who is dealing in secrets. Or at least in riddles."

"Tell me you haven't heard."

"Raymond, will you please sit down and make an effort to engage in sequential thought."

Raymond sat and glared silently at the nun. "They found the body."

Emtee Dempsey waited, but Kim noticed that the old nun was pressing her palms flat on the desk.

"Body isn't quite accurate. There can't be much left but bones."

Eventually the story became clear. A developer who had bought half their old campus was engaged in putting up luxury housing. In preparing the site, he had come upon an old storm drain. When what appeared to be bones of a human cadaver were found, he called the police.

"And you assumed he called here as well."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Raymond looked at Kim. "I suppose it was just an accident that you mentioned that twenty-year-old disappearance to me just a few days ago."

"Raymond, you can't believe we knew."

Like Emtee Dempsey, like Raymond, Kim assumed that they were talking about the remains of Catherine Raines.

"Have you been out there, Raymond?" Emtee Dempsey asked.

"I stopped here on my way."

"Good man. Sister Kimberly can go with you."

Raymond objected to this until the old nun convinced him that had been his reason for coming by Walton Street on his way to their old campus. Kim said, "I'll be right with you."

Jane said, "Can I go?"

Emtee Dempsey thought about it. "You're right. Nuns should always travel in pairs."

If that had once been the rule, it was now more honored in the breach than the observance. The old nun was constantly sending Kim off on solo errands.

From time to time, Kim had made a sentimental visit to their old campus and, it turned out, so had Jane. Emtee Dempsey, on the other hand, had never once visited the scene of her academic life. Some memories were simply too painful. Raymond parked his unmarked car and went in search of the builder. Kim and Jane walked silently along a ruined walk, the great slabs of pavement tumbled aside by the busy little machine that had been parked when the grim discovery was made. A manhole cover angled against a mound of dirt. Kim and Jane were staring into its depths when Raymond returned with Wallace Stevenson, the developer.

"You'll need a light to see anything." He directed a flashlight into the depth and Jane leapt back with a cry. Kim was immediately at her side. Neither of them had ever seen anything more gruesome than a recently dead person prepared for burial. The bones in the depths of the well told a surer tale of our common destiny.

Raymond had taken a look and then was on the radio, summoning the appropriate experts. Jane and Kim continued to back away. They were both assailed by memories of long-ago evening strolls along that sidewalk. How often had they passed the hidden remains of Catherine Raines?

For that is what the skeleton proved to be. A glass from the nursing home provided DNA that made the identification certain. Of course, old Mrs. Raines was not told. When Emtee Dempsey sent Kim to her it was with instructions to use discretion.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At the nursing home, Kim sat with Mrs. Raines and talked about her daughter.

"I understand that she was a poet," Kim said.

"Oh, she got that from me. And I got it from my mother, who was a great fan of Edgar Guest." There was no irony in the old voice when she said this.

"You wrote poetry, too?"

"Most of my life. Look in that chest, you'll see."

The chest beside her bed held half a dozen notebooks. Kim took one and began to read it. After a moment, she looked up.

"I'd like so much to show these to Sister Mary Teresa."

"Does she write poetry?"

"You'll have to wait for her autobiography."

Mrs. Raines was flattered by Kim's interest and so the notebooks went back to the house on Walton Street. Kim just put them on the old nun's desk and left her alone. Fifteen minutes later she was summoned to the study.

"Did you read any of these?"

"I leafed through one of the notebooks."

"And?"

"What do you think?"

"What anyone would think. Ask Hannah Fence to come see me."

5.

Shortly before Hannah was due to arrive, Kim went off to the Rush Street bookstore and busied herself with the bound volumes of *Fennel and Rue,* comparing poems in back issues with those that made up Hannah's little volume of verse. When Emtee Dempsey's guess was verified, Kim headed back to Walton Street. Hannah was still with the old nun.

"Well?" Emtee Dempsey asked Kim.

Kim nodded. "You won't need me."

"Sister, please sit down. Tell Hannah what you have discovered."

But a gasp from the poet, who had been following the odd exchange between the two nuns, told the story.

"The collection of poems you published were not your own, were they?"

"Oh, Sister, that wasn't my original intention. I meant to bring them out as a tribute to Catherine. In her memory."

"But once you'd put your name on it you were afraid that someone with access to a bound set of *Fennel and Rue* would discover what you had done."

Raymond had arrived and taken a chair in a corner of the study.

"It was such a stupid thing to do."

"Of course that wasn't all."

"What do you mean?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I think you know. The poem that won you the Mundelein prize was not yours either, was it? Catherine must have submitted it."

Hannah looked abjectly at the old nun. "You make me feel like a schoolgirl again."

"Yes. And a rather uncommon schoolgirl at that. Why don't you tell us the full story?"

Conscience is a powerful thing, and doubtless Hannah's had gnawed at her during the years when she had recalled what she had done, winning a prize with another girl's poem.

"You can imagine how I have felt all these years. That is why I wanted to publish Catherine's poems. As a posthumous tribute."

"So you were certain she was dead."

Hannah looked at Kim and at Raymond, and then back at the old nun. "I just assumed . . . Everyone did. Didn't you?"

"No need to assume anymore, Hannah. The body has been found, what is left of it. I think you know where."

"Oh my God!"

Raymond broke in to give a description of what had been found on the campus of their old college.

"Sister, this is so eerie. Catherine and I had passed that manhole cover a hundred times without really noticing it, and then one afternoon we did. We managed to pry it loose and look inside. It gave us the creeps, a hole in the earth opening up like that . . ." She stopped, and seemed to shrivel into herself. Had she rehearsed for this confrontation?

"When did Catherine discover that you intended to use as your own the poem she had given you as editor?"

"Sister, you don't think . . ."

"Yes, Hannah, I am afraid I do."

But there are deeds that can be known and cannot be proved. Raymond's presence brought back caution to Hannah.

"Plagiarism is not that much of a crime," she said to Raymond, trying to laugh. "Surely you don't intend to arrest me."

"Lady, I wouldn't arrest you even if you told me you had pushed your friend into that hole. The prosecutor wouldn't go near it."

"Of course not! It is nonsense to think I would do such a thing."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Raymond said. He stood, nodded at the old nun, and left the study. Kim went with him to the street door. He looked at Kim.

"Did she really think I would arrest that woman?"

"I'll ask her."

Raymond shook his head and stepped out into a present more troubled than the past.

Hannah was still seated facing Emtee Dempsey when Kim returned.

"Would you feel better if I announced that those poems are Catherine's?" Hannah said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, I wouldn't bother. They're not Catherine's either."

"What do you mean?"

"Someday I'll tell you. After you've made your peace with God."

When Hannah was gone, shown out by Jane, the old nun sat in silence for a time. "I suppose a logician would say that you can't plagiarize a plagiarism."

"You think she killed Catherine, don't you?"

"Of course."

More silence. "It would be nice if Mrs. Raines could be told. But what is the point now?" She picked up the copy of the book of poems that Hannah had published as her own. Her lips moved, and then she read aloud the second quatrain of the poem she had read earlier.

> O foolish virgins, out of oil,
> What matter that you work and toil,
> The groom is knocking at the door
> But you have rushed off to the store.

"The metrics are regular and the rhymes are sure. But it is a poor poem, hardly more than a jingle."

"Yet it won a prize."

"Let that be a lesson to you," Emtee Dempsey said enigmatically. "Not every wearer of the laurel has run a good race. And not every winner knows that she has won."

And Kim thought of Mrs. Raines, winner of the Mundelein prize, waiting patiently in Little Flower nursing home until she could join her daughter. ●

"Until now, Brenda, it always annoyed me when you finished my sentences."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Evan Walker

A Darkening of Flies

by Brian Muir

A friend of mine up the coast in Pluvius, Washington, once told me it poured there for 362 days one year. And those other three days were damn cloudy.

I know how he felt.

For twenty-five days straight the clouds have opened up down here, with nary a peek of sun. And this is supposed to be summer.

My employment situation wasn't helping my normal sugary disposition. My last paying gig was six weeks past, hunting down a deadbeat dad for a divorce attorney. Easy job, but no windfall. Lawyers are notoriously tight with their green.

When I haven't worked in a while it screws with my head. I begin to question my abilities, wanting a paycheck as much for validation as for putting grub on the table.

So with frogpelts in short supply and the grey clouds reflecting my self-doubt, I needed to get out of town for a few days. Sometimes taking a break from not working can do wonders.

I made sure Stomper had plenty to eat, locked up the houseboat, and stepped up the slick dock with a bag of gear slung over my shoulder. Not one of my neighbors peered out a window to wave

©2007 by Brian Muir

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

goodbye, which was okay by me.

I pulled the elbow-length cape of my customized black greatcoat up over my head to keep my long dark tresses dry as I hiked to my parked 1952 Willys Army Jeep. A holdover from the Korean conflict, the battered relic gets me where I need to go with only minimal creaking and protesting. I put what I could afford in the tank —what I could've shelled out on a steak dinner for two at El Gaucho.

Instead of taking the dreary I-5 south to Corvallis, I headed east on Powell until it turned into Highway 26 and Portland disappeared from my rearview.

The rain downshifted to a drizzle, constant and steady, as I cut through towering lodgepole pine and canopies of old-growth fir so thick they turned the grey day nearly to night.

I passed only a few cars heading the other way as the road kept up a gradual climb around the south base of Mount Hood. The snowy peak of the Granddad was somewhere off to my left, but I couldn't see it for the low dank clouds forming a dense fog that pressed down on the whole world. It was like driving through an old black-and-white *Outer Limits* episode, the one where aliens slice out a chunk of earth and transport it to their murky planet for study.

It didn't end well, as I recall.

I finally hit 97 south and kept going, driving away from the drizzle until the patter subsided from my Jeep's canvas winter top. The lonely highway bisected sage dotted with Ponderosa pine. After about fifty miles I hit the outskirts of Bend, the main watering hole between southern Oregon and the arid, sparsely populated eastern flatland.

I stopped at a diner at the edge of town and stretched my legs. The white clouds were breaking up, allowing patches of blue to peek through. It was warm enough that I thought about leaving my coat in the car, but that would mean unhooking my shoulder holster and leaving my piece in the glove box. Besides, I had a growling stomach to quiet.

I walked in, straight through to the restroom in back to relieve my travel-addled bladder. I took note of the light crowd as I

Brian Muir's fiction debut was in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in June 2004. But he had been a Hollywood screenwriter before turning to short story and novel writing. His most recent movie project is an independent film that premiered at the South by Southwest film festival in March 2007, called *Broke Sky*— "a drama set in Texas," he tells us, "about murder and dark family secrets."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

passed: beanpole manager behind the register, an elderly couple at the counter, a nuclear family with baby in a highchair occupying a table dead center, and three burly guys laughing in a rear booth.

After cleaning up, I got a booth to myself near the front, ordered coffee and a ham and egg breakfast with an extra side of greasy ham. I chugged the coffee and opened my *Lonesome Dove* paperback, which I'd been thumbing for a year but hadn't had the chance to finish. Augustus had just taken an arrow in the thigh. I knew how that turned out because I'd seen the miniseries, yet still I leaned close to the pages with dread anticipation.

After a few minutes of reading, I heard what sounded like jangling spurs. Figuring it was only a tray of clattering silverware, I looked up to see a pair of passing dark boots sporting black steel spurs with ten-point rowels.

The man in the boots was lean, clean-shaven, with a tattersall shirt and no hat. He glanced over his shoulder at me as he passed. I held the stare without giving him an opening; if he opted to make a move later, I'd decide then whether or not I was interested.

The cowboy squeezed into the rear booth with the three guys. Jerking a thumb in my direction, he said something that caused them all to snigger like third-graders. Comedy with a capital K.

"No point staring after that one."

The waitress warmed my coffee. She wasn't as old as she sounded, maybe late twenties, hefty with short blond hair scrunched in back, her wicked grin a cherry scimitar slash. The nametag said "Marta."

"That's Jack Youngblood, foreman out at the Jenkins Ranch. The old man he's sitting with is Jenkins himself."

Upon closer inspection of the corner booth, one man was definitely older than the other three, his posture square, full crown of slick powder-white hair and a string tie. No doubt he could still hold his own in a bar fight, if he were ever to be seen in such a joint.

Marta continued, "Word is, Jack's been diddling Jenkins's young wife whenever the old man is out of town on business. She used to be a 'dancer' over in Salem."

Marta even did the finger quotes when she said "dancer," no small feat still holding the pot of joe.

"That tidbit's even chewier than this ham," I said.

"Honey, the gossip in this place is the only thing keeping me alive."

"What about the others?" I meant the extra deuce in the booth. The short one was hunched over his food, arms gorilla-hugging the plate as he shoveled his lunch in like a backhoe.

"That's Caulder McHenry, a wrangler out at the ranch. His brother used to work there too, but I haven't seen him in a while.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The big one with the beard is Coop Williams, and you keep clear of him; he's the one I'm angling after."

"You can have him. He's too much man for me." And he was; couldn't be a kilo under three big ones.

The baby at the center table started bawling and the father waved to get Marta's attention. She gave my coffee a fill-up before shuffling over.

"You need anything else, you let me know," she said, not expecting an answer.

I surprised her. "Put a slice of Marionberry pie on deck."

"You put all that food away and still look like that?" She pinched her face and shook her head. "I hate you."

She moved off to help the family.

I opened my book.

That's when two guys came through the door with machetes.

"Get the money out of the till. Now!" one of them shouted at the manager behind the register, waving his blade at Marta. "You! Get back there with him!"

She obeyed quietly, still holding the coffeepot.

The second guy slammed his blade on my table, rattling the ketchup and making my spoon hop. I stayed calm.

"Put your book down!"

Put my book down? What the hell, he was the boss. For now.

I laid the book down and put my hands palm-flat on the table. Didn't want to give him a clue what I had under my coat, glad I'd opted not to leave it in the car.

He stared at me as if uncertain what to do, sweating and licking his lips nervously.

Both guys looked to be Hispanic or maybe Paiute, scared or hopped-up or both.

He darted off to join his partner, ordering the old couple at the counter to hand over their money, then turned to the family at the center table. The father complied, pulling out his wallet, and the mother cradled her screaming child protectively. The first guy moved to the rear booth, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"All your money, now!" Hacking a nearby chair for punctuation.

The short one, Caulder, was the first to protest. Then Youngblood joined in, whether by nature or just puffing up for my benefit, I couldn't tell. Coop and the old man were calm in the face of the storm. In fact, Jenkins was already extracting a billfold from his breast pocket.

"It's okay, boys. Let's just give these fellas what they want and send them on their way."

"But it's not right, Mr. Jenkins!"

"Calm down, Caulder. We'll leave these two to the police."

"But it's not right, I tell ya!" Caulder suddenly launched out of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the booth at the heister.

The guy lifted his machete and brought the wooden handle down on the crown of Caulder's head. I heard the *thwok* all the way up at my booth. It staggered Caulder but didn't knock him out. He extended an arm to steady himself, spilling a napkin dispenser.

That's when Coop rose, a grizzly protecting its cub, teeth bared behind his beard.

The robber held his ground, machete ready with the blade end this time.

I slowly slid a hand across my table toward my coat . . .

At the back booth, Youngblood took control, calming Coop and setting him down.

The robber boiled. "You four! In the back, move!" He shoved the dizzy Caulder to get him stepping and ushered the other three from the booth, prodding with machete tip.

This was taking an ugly turn.

As he herded them toward the men's room, the robber glanced back to his partner.. "Keep an eye on them!"

The other one did as he was told, scanning us with peeled-egg eyes, waving his blade around like Attila the Hun at a piñata party.

"Hurry with the money!" he screamed, reaching an arm over the counter to assist the reluctant manager with the till stash. I'd be next.

I reached inside my coat as if for my money, quietly popping the Velcro retention strap and pulling steel free; keeping it hidden under my coat.

The nervous guy shoved the till bills in his pants, a few of them fluttering to the floor unnoticed.

He shouted toward the back, "Hurry up! Let's go!"

He came toward my booth.

I started to draw my hand out of my coat.

Then the restroom door banged open and the first robber barreled out with a banshee wail, shouting something in English, Spanish, or Martian, I couldn't tell.

Next to my booth, his partner spun to see what was up.

I stood and swung my gun, catching him square in the face, pulverizing his nose like a sack of dry noodles.

He fell back, blood streaming down his face. His machete went skidding across the floor, the blade wedging under a gumball stand.

The other guy kept coming, weapon raised, hollering his fool head off.

I fired once, nailing him in the fleshy part of the arm.

He sat down hard, a stunned look on his face, still clutching the machete.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I took it out of his hand as I stepped past. These two would be okay.

The mother at the center table wailed as loud as her baby. I gave her husband an irritated glance and he took over, cooing, "It's okay, honey. It's all done now."

I hoped he was right.

I turned to tell Marta to call 911, but she was already on top of it, phone in mid dial.

The elderly couple was as placid as if they'd just sat through a tepid rerun of *Walker, Texas Ranger.*

"Nice shooting," said the old guy.

I nodded and raced to the back.

Swinging open the restroom door, I found Coop and Caulder unconscious on the floor. Youngblood, the cowboy, was on his butt leaning against a closed stall, rubbing the back of his sore head.

On the floor next to him, Jenkins was flat on his back, peaceful in repose but for his staring marble eyes and the dark stain like a maroon bib spreading across his chest.

His throat had been slashed ear to ear.

Ten minutes later the front door was locked and the rundown in the diner was something like this:

The two bandits were in a booth, one holding an ice-packed washcloth to his busted nose, the other sitting still as Marta wrapped his arm in a towel while we waited for paramedics.

Caulder and Youngblood shared an adjoining booth, holding compresses to their aching heads.

Big Coop sat by himself in a third booth, sipping a Coke. He didn't seem much the worse for wear.

The family was huddled with the elderly couple at the counter.

"At least let me get my money back from these a-holes!" shouted the manager, hovering behind the register. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed drily.

"Not until the police get here," I said. By now I had my coat off, gun back in the horizontal-carry holster that crossed my form-hugging tee.

Youngblood gave me the eye again, now that my shape was in full view. Sometimes I like the attention, but most times I can do without. It comes with the territory.

Coop looked over and smiled, too. Even the elderly guy at the counter gave me the once-over. I got a kick out of that.

"I wanna see you shoot that thing again," he said.

Apparently it was my pistol he was eyeballing and not my mother's mammiferous genetic endowment. Ah, vanity.

"Not today, Pops. Sorry."

"Boy, but that was nice shootin'."

After hanging up with 911, Marta had informed us that most of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bend's small police force was somewhere east of here, helping evacuate ranches from the path of an oncoming forest fire. A month of rain in Portland and half a state away they're battling blazes. The closest cops were on the other side of town on a domestic-disturbance call. They'd be here in a half-hour.

But I'm not one to just sit around waiting.

"Something about this stinks like twenty pounds of you-know-what in a ten-pound bag," I said, to anyone listening.

"Murder always stinks," said Youngblood. He pointed at the robber with the bullet hole in his arm. "And I want to see this one fry for it!"

The robber glowered.

"But why did he leave the rest of us out here and only take you four in back?"

Youngblood shrugged. "Ask him."

I looked to the robber. He gave another pug-ugly scowl.

"I've got a different idea," I said. I crossed to the gumball machine in the corner and tugged the machete from under the metal stand. I laid it on the table in front of its owner, the robber with the crushed nose.

"What are you doing?" shouted the worried mother.

"He won't try anything," I offered. Then I set the other machete in front of his partner. "Neither will he. They know what I can do with this."

I patted my holstered friend.

"You just gave that one back the murder weapon," said Coop.

"Did I? You expect me to believe he knocked all three of you guys out by himself, killed Jenkins, *and* cleaned the blade? All in the little time you were in there? Nobody's that fast."

"What are you saying?" asked Caulder, gingerly rubbing the knot on his head.

"I told you something stinks."

I glanced out the window. Looky-loos gathered in the parking lot, no doubt drawn by the gunfire and the Closed sign on the door.

I turned to the manager. "Could you go out and keep everybody back on the sidewalk? Tell them the police are on their way."

Grumbling, he complied, heading out to quiet the crowd.

I leaned against a table and stared at the ranch hands. "Now. You three."

"What about us?" asked Caulder.

"You carry blades?"

Youngblood answered, "We'd hardly be ranch hands worth a spit if we didn't."

"That's what I thought. Haul them out."

The three exchanged sly glances.

"You a cop?" asked Youngblood.

"Concerned citizen."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No way am I doing it," he said.

"You think one of us killed Jenkins?" asked Caulder.

"I'm just marking time till the police get here."

They sat silently, three monkeys speaking no evil. Marta and the patrons waited by the counter.

Finally, Coop's face opened with a wide grin. "What the hell," he said, pulling a small pocketknife from his back pocket. "Let's see how this plays out." He opened the knife and laid it on the table in front of him, took another chug of Coke.

Caulder followed, reluctantly, laying his own blade before him.

Youngblood still wasn't budging. "This is stupid! Jenkins signed my checks, signed all of our checks. What the hell reason would I have for killing him?"

"Maybe a little dancer from Salem had something to do with it," I said.

His face froze like he'd just gotten an eyeful of the Medusa's serpentine 'do.

I didn't dare glance at Marta because I knew she'd be smirking. Youngblood couldn't know how I got that info. Right now I had the upper hand—he had no idea how much I knew.

When his shock wore off he reached to his belt and unsheathed a blade that made Jim Bowie's look like a nail file. He laid it on the table, muttering a string of short but expressive old Anglo-Saxon words of four and five letters.

I looked at his knife. It gleamed. "Nice. Goes with your spurs."

"I haven't cut anybody's throat with it since at least last week."

I grinned, sidestepped to the front door, opened it. "Keep them back!" I shouted to the manager dutifully restraining curious citizenry. I propped the door open with a chair.

Marta piped up, "You're going to let all the bugs in, honey."

"That's the idea," I said.

I sauntered back, leaned my butt against a table, cocked a knee, and set a boot on a chair, striking quite a pose. I imagined I was being directed by John Ford, a town sheriff facing five suspected culprits: a couple of banditos, two ranch hands, and a cocksure foreman who was making time with his murdered boss's young filly.

"I think before the posse arrives we got time for a little story." I realized my speech had a thick Texas twang. I dialed it back.

The old man barked from the counter, "I wanna see you shoot that gun again."

His taciturn wife spoke up for the first time since this started. "Oh, Elbert, honestly."

I looked at the family, mother cradling now-sleeping infant. "You folks okay?"

The couple nodded simultaneously. Both had calmed considerably.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I turned back to the five in the booths.

Coop drained the last of his soda and rattled the ice cubes in the plastic glass. "Can I have another Coke?"

I stared at him. He grinned.

Marta looked at me as if I was suddenly her boss. "Go ahead," I told her.

She fetched Coop's empty glass to refill it.

"You're acting pretty casual for a guy who might be a killer," I said. "But maybe that's your game."

Coop shrugged. "This is more entertaining than my average Wednesday."

"I take it you didn't care for Jenkins."

His smile waned. "We never had a beef, but we weren't exactly bosom. He didn't deserve what he got, that's a fact."

Caulder spoke up, jerking a thumb at the bandits in the next booth. "So if that guy didn't have time to knock us out, kill Jenkins, and clean his weapon, how could one of us do it?"

"One couldn't, but two of you could. One kills Jenkins and cleans the murder weapon after the other knocks two of you out. He would've hit you from behind so the innocent guys wouldn't see who clubbed them."

The three exchanged glances, thinking it over, trying to remember exactly how it went down in the restroom.

"But all three of us were knocked out," said Youngblood.

"You were awake by the time I got back there. If you'd ever actually been asleep."

"This is stupid," he repeated.

"You were Jenkins's foreman. Must have worked for him awhile. He trusted you, because while he was out inspecting the herd or bidding on new head, he had no idea what was going on back at the ranch between you and his dancing frau."

Youngblood shook his head, pissed.

Caulder and Coop sly-eyed each other. They'd heard the rumors.

"Did Jenkins have some provision in his will about you running the place after he's gone?"

"How the hell should I know?" Indignant and surly.

Marta returned with Coop's fresh Coke, saying, "So what's the story you were going to tell?" The lady liked stories; that's what kept her eight hours of table-hopping fresh. She swiped a bug buzzing her head.

"These machetes got me thinking. Something I read once, about a ruler in China, near the Tianshan Mountains. This would have been during the Han period, back in early B.C. This ruler wasn't too well liked by his subjects. Seems he was letting the wealthy slide on their taxes, leaving the merchants and peasants to pick up the slack. Anyway, one day he decided to take a tour of the countryside with his Royal Guard. He wandered off by himself to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inspect some farmland and was later found in a field, hacked to death by a machete.

"There were about twenty farmers out there at the time, clearing marshland for a rice field. One of them had seen his opportunity and took it. But which one?"

"Should I order pie while I wait for you to finish?"

It was Youngblood, getting on my nerves now. "No. But Coop can have a slice if he wants."

The big man snorted, amused.

The two bandits listened quietly, nursing wounds. Lids heavy over hard eyes.

"Anyway, the head of the ruler's Guard gathered the farmers together, made them all stand in a row and set their machetes on the ground in front of them. All their blades were clean; whoever'd done the deed had washed his weapon in a nearby stream. But see, this guard knew something; the boy was ahead of his time. He made all those farmers stand there and wait. And it was a hot, dry day."

"Like we're waiting now," said Caulder. "So what's the point?"

Coop wiped a bead of sweat from his temple. Youngblood twitched a finger as a fly landed on it. The bug zipped away.

"The point is: Flies always find the blood. No matter how much you wash it off, they find the scent. All it takes is a few stray microbes. That's what this guard knew. So he had all those farmers stand and wait, on that hot, sweaty day. Wait for the flies to show up and land on the murder weapon, pointing him to the killer."

Youngblood scoffed again, "This is—"

"Stupid?" I finished. "I realize it's not exactly *CSI,* but stupid it ain't, cowboy."

It might not have been stupid, but hell if I knew if it was actually going to work. Given my recent unemployment, I was second-guessing myself a lot lately.

"So you're thinking that two of us teamed up to take out Jenkins?" It was Coop, getting into it.

"No, I think it was one of you," then I nodded to the silent bandits, "and these two. I'm guessing they were hired to come in and make it look like a holdup, then do Jenkins. Or maybe only one of them was privy to the murder part. Maybe this one that went into the bathroom with you guys, the one I shot, got cold feet and backed out. There was an argument back there with whichever one of you hired him; that's why he came racing out hollering and angry, leaving one of you to finish off Jenkins by his lonesome."

"After the other two of us had been knocked out," finished Coop.

I nodded.

Caulder pointed to the arm-shot bandit. "That means it was him who knocked us out?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Or whoever hired him. From behind, like I said."

Coop grunted, "I was hit from behind."

"So was I," said Youngblood. He pointed to the bruise on the back of his neck.

"Me too," offered Caulder, lowering his head to show off the pinkish egg sprouting from his scalp. "So did one of us club himself?" He chuckled like he'd just delivered a punchline.

"Nope," I said, staring Caulder down. "Not you, anyway. Because you've only got one bump."

"That's all it took. He hit me hard."

I shook my head. "No. That bump happened out here. We all saw it. He clubbed you with the butt end of his blade for show. It staggered you, but didn't knock you out. If he'd hit you in the bathroom, you'd have *two* bumps."

Caulder's face bunched up as if someone had just told him hippos could fly. "I'm with Youngblood. This is stupid."

By now both Coop and Youngblood had turned to regard Caulder suspiciously.

Caulder jerked his head back and forth between the two, defensive. "Come on! I got no reason to see Jenkins dead!"

I thought of one more thing, but wasn't sure if the bait was big enough for the fish: "Maybe it has something to do with your brother."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He ran a hand through coarse dark hair.

"That's right," said Coop. "His brother Matt got canned a couple of weeks ago."

"And for that I kill him? Come on, Coop, you know me."

I offered something else. "Your brother gets cut, so you cut Jenkins. Poetic, in a crude sort of way. Like a Cro-Magnon chiseling a haiku on the cave wall."

"For firing Matt?" Caulder was incredulous.

Youngblood had been cogitating for thirty seconds or so. "Maybe it's more than that," he said.

We waited for him to continue.

"About three months ago, Mr. Jenkins was mugged after his Thursday bank stop, by guys wearing ski masks. Normally, I went with him, but that day I was out vaccinating and ear-marking some new head with Caulder. Later, Mr. Jenkins always suspected Matt had something to do with the mugging; it'd been Matt's day off. Hell, maybe even one of these two was in on it." He meant the bandits.

The one with the busted nose shifted, a clear tell.

"Mr. Jenkins finally got tired of suspecting Matt and let him go."

"And that's why Jenkins was killed?" wondered Coop.

Youngblood shrugged. "Maybe. Think about it . . . "

I let the overgrown Hardy Boys keep going while Caulder sweated it out between them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mr. Jenkins asked me last month if I thought Caulder could have been involved with the mugging, like maybe he'd given Matt details about the bank stop. I said no way, Caulder's a stand-up guy. But that wasn't good enough for Mr. Jenkins." Youngblood stared at Caulder. "He told me he was going to start digging around about you."

"Come to think of it," said Coop, "Caulder's got a brand-new pair of dancing boots and a turquoise buckle out in the bunkhouse."

"Really?" asked Youngblood.

Caulder was finally fed up. "I bought those with last year's bonus!"

Coop guffawed. "You never sat on a bonus more'n three days!"

"So you think I arranged that mugging and Jenkins was going to nail me for it? That's still no reason to kill the guy!" Caulder looked from one to the other and back to me, assured.

"Unless you're a third-striker," I said.

Caulder blanched.

"I saw the way you were eating your food, guarding it with your arms wrapped around your plate. That's how a convict eats. You done time, Caulder? If Jenkins snooped around about your past, he would have found out about your record and brought the cops in to question you about the mugging. And you couldn't handle the idea of going back in for a long stretch. That's why you killed him. Stupid, Caulder, real stupid."

Frustrated, he swept his arm across the tabletop, sending his pocketknife flying. It bounced off a chair and clattered to the floor, spinning like a propeller. It slowed to a stop under an oil painting of Haystack Rock at Cannon Beach.

Caulder rocketed from his seat like a giant coil just sproinged his butt.

But I already had my gun out. Pointed at his chest.

"Shoot him!" said the old man, somewhere behind me.

"Honestly," his exasperated wife replied.

The police arrived twenty minutes later and grilled everybody, taking enough notes to fill a whole file drawer. They hauled Caulder away in cuffs.

Me they kept the longest, firing questions until long after the sun went down. They didn't take too kindly to a private citizen playing Dirty Harriet, discharging a firearm within city limits with intent to do bodily harm.

One thing convinced them to lean in my favor.

Across the room, under the painting of waves lapping at Haystack Rock, on the blade of Caulder's pocketknife, flies gathered in a dark cloud.

Hell. It actually worked.

It surprised even me. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLOG BYTES

by Ed Gorman

ClueLass: When editor Kate Derie promises "A mystery lover's notebook. Comprehensive information about the world of mystery fiction: books, authors, booksellers, awards, events, groups, magazines" and much much more, she isn't exaggerating. This is one of the most useful sites on the Net. The search engine here is especially useful and the Mysterious Home Page delivers "a streamlined, 'just the links, ma'am' jumping off site for the mystery world online. These pages are designed for maximum accessibility with lower-speed internet connections, text-only browsers, and screen-reader applications." A major site for mystery readers of all kinds. **http://www.cluelass.com**

Noir Originals: I'm quoted here as saying that this site is *"A WEBSITE OF STYLE, SUBSTANCE AND TRUE LASTING IMPORTANCE"* and I've never had any reason to change my mind. Not only is Allan Guthrie the editor of one of the hardboiled world's best sites, he's also becoming a major novelist in both England and America. Guthrie mixes current and historical pieces on noirish writing of every kind from old-style pulp to cutting-edge new. He keeps a backlog of articles for readers who have only recently logged on. It's in the backlog that you see the true breadth of material he's amassed, most of it informal, some of it more academic. To his credit, Guthrie champions many writers who have been forgotten or overlooked, writers who deserve attention. A staple site for hardboiled fans. **http://www.allanguthrie.co.uk**

Vorpal Blade Online: Steven Steinbock devotes the current issue to a long and heavily illustrated history of Dell mystery paperbacks: "Between 1942 and 1962 (according to William H. Lyles, *Putting Dell on the Map*) Dell Publishing Company put out 2,168 paperbacks." This is an important history because Dell published key writers such as Ellery Queen, Rex Stout, Margaret Millar, and Agatha Christie, among many others. And in the 'fifties, under the able stewardship of editor Knox Burger, Dell Originals offered readers such compelling talents as John D. MacDonald, Charles Williams, Richard Jessup, and James McKimmey. Another feature of many of the early Dell mysteries was the so-called "mapbacks"—stylized maps on the back covers that laid out the entire scene where the murders take place, including a lot of Christie-style country estates. The mapbacks are highly collectible today and go for a good price on the Net. Readers will enjoy looking back on where we all came from both as fans and writers. **http://stevensteinbock.blogspot.com**

©2007 by Ed Gorman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SERIOUS MONEY

by John Morgan Wilson

Moments after he discovered the girl unconscious, Ryan Stark heard knuckles rap on his motel room door. He patted her pretty face, trying to rouse her. The knocking on the door grew louder.

He slapped the girl several times and shook her by the shoulders. She didn't move. A meaty fist pounded outside, followed by a deep male voice.

"Police! Open up!"

"Dear God," Ryan muttered, and felt panic engulf him.

It was a cheap motel along a two-lane highway in North Carolina, the only rental rooms for a hundred miles in this godforsaken place, except for a few ramshackle cabins up the road. The Pine Haven Motel, with a sputtering neon sign out front, an all-night coffee shop next to the office, and a swimming pool with pine needles and oak leaves at the bottom in a puddle of dirty water from the last rain.

The only reason Ryan was staying here was the setting. Pine Haven was a small town—no more than a gas stop, really—with a Blue Ridge Mountains backdrop that was ideal for some crucial scenes in the movie he was shooting. *Passing Through*—possibly the most important film of his career. He wasn't just the star this time but also the executive producer. He'd put up half the money himself, the script was that good. It offered him an incredible leading role, the kind that might catapult him from the ranks of pretty-boy star to serious actor. The kind that could generate Oscar buzz, maybe even a nomination. The kind that could seriously elevate an actor's career and keep him out of the dustbin of has-beens or the wasteland of the daytime soaps, where the has-beens went to die. The soaps—he shuddered just thinking about

John Morgan Wilson won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel in 1997 for the debut of his Benjamin Justice series. His seventh and latest Justice mystery, *Rhapsody in Blood*, was published by St. Martin's Minotaur in March, 2006. Like *Rhapsody in Blood*, the following story revolves around the world of Hollywood filmmakers. Mr. Wilson is also a veteran journalist and writer of fact-based TV programming.

©2007 by John Morgan Wilson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that possibility.

"Police! Open up, or we'll kick in the door!"

The girl was in her panties and bra, a pale blonde, slim but nubile. A few of the pills he'd given her were strewn about the bed. Not all of them, though—and the vial was empty. He figured she must have taken the rest. He'd only intended her to take one or two, enough to help her loosen up, get in the mood. That had been around midnight, when he'd left her alone to take a shower and get himself ready for a brief romantic interlude that would help him relax and sleep better, so he'd look and feel his best for the next day's shooting. He'd brought her back to his room after she'd made eyes at him in the motel coffee shop, fully intending to have his fun and send her on her way within the hour. But after his shower he'd lost track of the time in front of the mirror getting his face and hair right. He always made himself presentable for the ladies, even if they'd never see him again. He was Ryan Stark, after all. *People* magazine's Sexiest Man Alive, not once but twice. He had an image to uphold, a reputation. Applying his skin toner evenly took several minutes all by itself.

But all that was a mere afterthought at the moment. Nothing mattered now except this unconscious girl and the impatient cop at the door.

"I'm coming," Ryan shouted, hearing the tremor in his voice. "Just a moment!"

His stricken eyes darted about the room, looking for a place to hide her. It was a single room, with a bathroom and a closet. All the rooms were like this, housing the cast and crew for three nights until they had the footage they needed and could move on to the next location and more luxurious quarters. He swept the pills off the bed with his hand and deposited them into a pocket of his robe. Then he rolled the girl to the edge of the bed and hoisted her over his shoulder. Moments later, he had her propped up in the shower stall, her long blond hair draped over her narrow shoulders. That's when he noticed that her blue eyes were open wide in a dull, blank stare. His panic soared to a new level. He wanted to check for a pulse but there wasn't time. He could hear the heavy fist again, pounding on the door outside. Then that threatening male voice.

"Last warning! Open this door now!"

Ryan jerked the shower curtain closed and dashed back into the room, his eyes searching wildly for incriminating evidence. For a moment, he caught sight of himself in the cheap glass of a full-length mirror: Ryan Stark, lean, muscular, darkly handsome, flawless face sculpted by the best cosmetic surgeon in Beverly Hills, and looking a lot younger than his forty-two years. A look worth twenty-five million a picture, plus more at the back end, when the profits were divvied up and the writers were screwed out of their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

share. He briefly wondered how much of that Hollywood bounty he'd give up to have just one respected critic pronounce him one of the finest actors of his generation. He'd have to give that more thought—the possibility of buying off a big-name critic—when he got himself out of this mess and back to L.A. If he'd learned one thing during his fifteen years in Hollywood, it was that just about anyone could be bought if the money was right.

Quickly, he straightened the bed and tossed the girl's outer garments underneath, kicking her shoes after them. He faced the door and pulled his plush white robe together, letting just enough chest hair show to accentuate his masculinity. Just before undoing the security lock, he drew himself up erect and got into character, exuding nonchalance but also confidence. When he opened the door, he found himself facing a cop in a uniform bearing the insignia of the Pine Haven Police Department.

"I'm afraid you caught me napping." Ryan offered his famous smile. Not the killer smile he used in sexy romantic roles on the big screen but the winning smile he favored on TV talk shows for broader appeal, when promoting his pictures. He glanced at his watch and yawned. "My, look at the time. What can I do for you, Officer?"

"We had a report of a young lady coming up to this room."

"A young lady?"

The cop cupped a hand to one ear. "Do I hear an echo?"

A smart-ass, small-town cop, Ryan thought. He looked the guy over, sized him up: on the short side, pushing fifty, balding, paunchy, shoes that needed polishing. Even the badge was tarnished. Hick town, hick cop. Ryan took a moment to steal a glance down the second-floor landing in each direction. He saw no one out and about. There was an early cast and crew call at dawn. The others were apparently all getting some shuteye, like he'd be doing if he didn't have to deal with the stupid girl in his bathroom and the annoying situation she'd caused. His eyes came back to the cop, who'd folded his arms belligerently across his chest. Trying to look bigger, Ryan thought, fighting the urge to laugh out loud. Trying to feel important behind his small-town badge.

"A number of people have been in and out," he said, turning on the charm. "As you probably know, we're shooting scenes for a movie. It might have been the script girl. She dropped in briefly to check some notes. What's the problem?"

"The girl we're looking for is local. Just turned sixteen, out past her curfew."

"Sixteen?" Ryan heard his voice catch, felt his pulse quicken. The girl had told him she was twenty. Twenty was an annoyance; sixteen was real trouble. He worked hard to prop up his smile. "No one that young here, Officer." He opened the door wider and took a step aside. "As you can see, I'm alone."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just the same, a witness saw the girl come up to this room."

"Perhaps it was another door. Easy to mistake one for another."

"The witness gave us a room number—this one. You want to tell me what the girl was doing here, Mr. Stark?"

Ryan beamed. "You recognized me."

"Just answer the question, Mr. Stark."

"Now that you mention it, I do recall a young lady knocking on my door about an hour ago. She wanted an autograph. I obliged her and sent her on her way."

"Funny you didn't think of it until just now."

"As I said, you woke me up. I'm still a bit groggy."

"Slim, long blond hair, blue eyes?"

"I didn't pay close attention, but that sounds about right."

"That girl never got home, Mr. Stark."

"Perhaps she's out having some fun. You know how teenagers are."

"It's a school night. This girl's a straight-A student. Never misses her curfew."

"I wish I could help you, I really do." Ryan shrugged apologetically. "If she comes back around, I'll certainly let you know."

He started to close the door, but the cop stopped it with the flat of his hand.

"Her father reported her missing," the cop said.

"Awfully soon for that, isn't it? It's barely past midnight. She could have had a flat tire driving home, fallen asleep studying with a boyfriend. All kinds of possibilities."

"Just the same, her father asked us to check."

Ryan laughed lightly. "Does her father really have that kind of clout? To send out the local gendarmes just because his daughter's out past midnight?"

The cop's face remained implacable. "Her father's the mayor. Duly elected by the good residents of Pine Haven. Yeah, he's got clout."

"The mayor?"

"There's that echo again," the cop said. "You have a problem with me looking around your room, Mr. Stark?"

"Really, Officer, this is getting out of hand."

"It sounds like maybe you do."

"It's late, and I have an early call in the morning. Perhaps you'd like to drop around tomorrow, watch us work. Bring the wife and kids if you'd like. Autographs for everyone, photos with the cast."

The cop kept his hand firmly on the door. "A minute or two, Mr. Stark, and that should do it."

"Not to be uncooperative, but don't you need a search warrant for that?"

"Witness saw the girl enter your room. That's probable cause."

Ryan felt a trickle of perspiration under his robe. He tried to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

relax, to get the confidence back in his voice. "I think I should speak with your supervisor. Perhaps he'll understand. We're spending quite a bit of money in your little town, you know."

"My supervisor is a she, not a he. And I've already called her."

Ryan was relieved to hear he'd be dealing with a woman. He hadn't met one yet who hadn't melted a little when he'd fixed her with the killer smile. The cop turned at the sound of a vehicle rolling into the parking lot below. It was a white, unmarked Crown Victoria, the type detectives often drive.

"That would be her now," the cop said.

The driver pulled into a space near the stairs and parked. A trim, attractive woman of about forty climbed out. Her auburn hair was pulled tight in a bun and she wore a well-cut business suit that showed off her figure nicely.

From the second landing, Ryan stared at her wide-eyed, his mouth agape. "Is that Felicia Farwell?"

The cop looked at him curiously. "You know the chief?"

"Felicia's the police chief?"

"Since last year, when our previous chief retired."

"You don't say." Ryan watched Felicia mount the stairs with a sense of strength and resolve that surprised him and made him feel vaguely uneasy.

"I heard you were in town, Jack, shooting a picture." Felicia faced Ryan across the doorway's threshold, discreetly surveying the room behind him. "Frankly, I didn't expect to run into you. Not if I could help it."

"The name's Ryan now. Ryan Stark." He found his smile again, along with his composure. "Changed it when I got to Hollywood."

Her smile was less pleasant. "You'll always be Jack Gluck to me."

"It's been a long time, Felicia."

"Fifteen years."

"I never figured you for police work."

"You always underestimated me, Jack."

"Still, a bump in the road like this. Not really your style, is it?"

"Pine Haven suits me. The people here treat each other with respect. I needed some of that when I landed here fifteen years ago, on my way to nowhere."

He flinched at that, not expecting her to be so tough. Then he looked her over, hoping to keep things light. "So, it's Chief Farwell now." The holstered gun caught his eye. He grinned, raising his finely tweezed eyebrows. "Wow—you're even packing heat."

"Chief, detective, and watch commander, all rolled into one," she said tersely. "We're a four-person department. I was on duty tonight. That's how I caught this call."

"Quite a coincidence, you ending up here, me stopping to shoot a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

few scenes. Life can be funny, the way it sometimes brings people back together."

"Let's not forget that report that came in, Jack." Her eyes were as steady as a camera lens in the hands of a master cinematographer, searching his eyes for the truth. "The one about a missing girl last seen entering your room."

He swallowed drily, tried to meet her gaze. "Yes, the officer mentioned something about it. There's obviously been a mistake. I tried to explain that there have been no young ladies in my room tonight."

"That would be unusual for you, wouldn't it?"

"Really, Felicia, you shouldn't believe everything you read in the tabloids."

She glanced at her watch, suddenly impatient. "We need to take a look inside, Jack. If she's not here, we'll be on our way."

He held his ground. "I don't see why—"

"I'm not kidding about this, Jack. We're not leaving until we have a look around."

Her green eyes were fierce, unblinking. He felt himself running out of options and decided to take a more confrontational approach. He set his jaw and squinted slightly, glowering like Eastwood in his early Italian Westerns. "You're just doing this because you're still angry over the way we broke up. Frankly, I expected better of you, Felicia."

"We didn't break up, Jack. You left me."

"People change," he said. "They grow apart."

"We didn't grow apart until the day you got that phone call from Hollywood and took off without me."

"Not every relationship is meant to last forever." He shrugged sympathetically. "I'm sorry if it was painful for you."

"It lasted until you didn't need me anymore, after I'd supported you for years in New York while you took acting classes and made the audition rounds."

"I seem to recall that you took a few acting classes yourself."

"When I wasn't working as a waitress fifty hours a week to support the two of us, along with your career. The expensive haircuts, the facials, the Pilates classes."

"I was always more ambitious than you, Felicia. More serious about the craft."

Her emerald eyes flashed like hot gems. "You never sent for me, Jack. Never offered to help me get a break after all the years I sacrificed to help you get yours."

"You see, you *are* angry. That's why you're doing this." He dropped the Eastwood look and switched on the George Clooney, showing his perfect teeth. "Why don't I get into some clothes? We can go down and get a cup of coffee, patch things up. You don't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

want old wounds to affect your professional judgment, do you, Felicia? You'll only regret it later."

"Nice reading, Jack. Your delivery was impeccable."

"Felicia, please—"

"Step aside, and let us into the room." Her hard eyes pinned his, and her hand went to her gun. "I won't ask again."

He swallowed with difficulty and reluctantly stepped back. Three times he'd been voted Most Popular Male Star at the People's Choice Awards. Maybe the critics didn't like him, he suddenly realized, but the people did, and that's what counted. But a scandal involving an underage girl could ruin him at the box office. The soaps might not even want him after this. He felt a part of himself shrivel as fear ran through him like a shiver during a nude scene on a cold set.

Felicia brushed past him with unmistakable authority. Ryan's knees trembled and his mind raced, trying desperately to figure some way out of this.

"I don't know how it happened, Felicia. I came from my shower and found her on the bed, passed out like this. I never thought she'd take so many pills."

Ryan stood outside the shower stall, wringing his hands and looking on anxiously as Felicia pressed two fingers to the girl's throat, trying to find a pulse. She'd posted the uniformed cop at the front door the moment she'd discovered the unconscious girl, telling him to keep any strangers from entering the room. She held the girl's wrist, then touched her cheek with the back of her hand. When she stood to face the man she'd once known as Jack Gluck, there wasn't a flicker of sympathy in her cold eyes.

"Forget unconscious, Jack. This girl's postmortem."

His eyes opened wide with shock. "What?"

"No pulse, no breath, cold to the touch. Beyond saving now."

"Oh Jesus." He turned away, feeling as if he might throw up.

"Maybe if you'd called nine-one-one when you first found her—"

He faced her again, still queasy, glistening with sweat. "My God, what am I going to do?"

"If you'd been truthful with us at the outset, she might still be alive. We could have induced vomiting, given her a fighting chance. As it is, you could be looking at second-degree murder."

"It was an accident!"

"Voluntary manslaughter if you're lucky."

"I didn't force her to take those pills."

"She's sixteen, Jack. You're old enough to be her father."

"She doesn't look sixteen. She told me she was twenty."

"I'm sure your attorney will convey all that to the jury."

"Felicia, for God's sake!"

Felicia stared down at the innocent-looking face. "She's a very

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

popular girl around here. Good student, never a hint of trouble. Her father's one of the most respected men in the county."

"The mayor," Ryan said dismally.

"The *unpaid* mayor," Felicia pointed out, "who works hard for Pine Haven and runs a gas station to make ends meet. On the other hand, you're a Hollywood big shot who makes buckets of money and dabbles in drugs, with a history of womanizing and a taste for young girls. I don't imagine this is going to go your way, Jack, when it gets to trial. You're facing a stiff prison stretch for sure."

"I'm too good-looking to go to prison!"

She smirked. "Maybe your attorney can bring that up, when it's time for sentencing."

Ryan slumped against the sink, his face in his hands. "This can't be happening." He looked up, desperation distorting his handsome features. "I'm at my peak, Felicia. Everything's going my way. I'm signed with the biggest agency in Hollywood. Producing my own pictures now. I've even found the perfect script. *Passing Through,* the one we're shooting. I've been looking for years for a script like this that would launch me to another level. I paid a million dollars to take it off the market." He glanced at the corpse in the shower, shuddering pitifully. "And now this."

"A million dollars," she said. "For one script?"

He nodded bleakly. "The script is everything. That's where it all starts. Without a great character and a great story as a foundation, all the rest doesn't mean much."

Her voice got tougher. "If a script is worth a million bucks, how much is a life worth?"

He stared at her imploringly. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

She sneered with disgust. "You haven't even asked her name."

"I'm sorry." He studied the lifeless figure in the shower, deeply ashamed. "Of course, I want to know."

"Rebecca. Her friends call her Becky. Her parents call her Beck. Her hard-working, churchgoing parents, who just lost their only child."

He stared miserably at the tiled floor. His words came softly, full of remorse. "I'm sure they're a fine family. Apparently, you know them pretty well."

Felicia shrugged. "It's a small town. You know how that is."

He glanced up, studying her keenly. "It still seems strange, finding you here." His smile was small, wistful. "You were so crazy about New York. All the theaters. So many plays, so many musicals. You always dug that scene."

"Like you said, Jack, people change."

"You're really happy here, so far away from everything?"

She hesitated. "I have to admit, a small town has its drawbacks."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He heard something in her voice, a shift in tone. He perked up a little. "Not the quiet paradise you thought it was when you came here fifteen years ago?"

She steadied her shrewd eyes on him. "Maybe it's begun to wear on me a little."

He chose his words cautiously. "That can happen, I guess."

"Lately, I've had an itch to travel. Maybe even relocate. Live another kind of life."

His heart raced with renewed hope. "We all need a change of scenery now and then."

"Not so easy to do on a cop's salary. Especially not in a little burg like Pine Haven, where the pay's at the low end. When I retire, my pension won't add up to much."

"I guess you start thinking about things like that as you get older."

"I'm only forty, Jack."

It was the perfect opening, just the line he'd been waiting for.

"Young enough to still do all the things you've dreamed of doing, Felicia." He paused with skilled precision, the way he'd seen the great ones do it—Brando, Olivier, Streep. De Niro, before he'd started making all those second-rate comedies for the big paychecks. Ryan added carefully, "That is, if you had a way to finance it."

Their eyes met. Maybe they hadn't seen each other in fifteen years, he thought, but he could still read Felicia Farwell like a cue card. That had been her problem as an aspiring actress. No subtlety. Always too obvious, too on the nose. He'd never told her that. He'd been careful not to bite the hand that fed him. He certainly wasn't going to tell her now.

"Maybe we should cut to the chase," he said.

"You've got a problem, Jack. Problems need solutions."

He finally had a reason to smile again, for real this time. "How much would it take to make my problem go away?"

"You mean get the body out of here, dispose of it, and help you cover your tracks? Make sure there's no connection to this room or to you?"

Ryan's voice rose with expectation. "Can you do that?"

"Shouldn't be that difficult, seeing as how I run the department."

"How much?"

"Exactly what you paid for that script—a million dollars."

"A million dollars?"

"There's that echo again." The uniformed cop stuck his balding head through the bathroom doorway.

"Jack and I were just discussing a possible business deal," Felicia said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I guess he's used to making deals, being a famous Hollywood actor and all."

"A million dollars is serious money," Ryan said.

She glanced at the dead girl in the shower. Her voice was grim, her eyes unforgiving. "Homicide is a serious matter, Jack."

He spread his hands plaintively. "Still, a million bucks—"

"Your beach house in Malibu is worth ten times that."

"How would you know?"

"*Entertainment Tonight.* We may be out in the sticks, but we still get satellite." She smiled at his discomfort before pressing on. "To make a movie, you must have millions at your disposal. I'm sure you can find a way to cover it as a production expense. Don't the studios do that kind of creative accounting all the time?"

"You always were smart about money, Felicia. I'll give you that."

Her voice was flat, all business. "Do we have a deal, or not?"

He laughed bitterly. "That's what you meant when you asked me how much a life was worth, wasn't it? You weren't talking about the girl. You were talking about me."

"You taught me a few things, Jack. Most of all, how to take care of Number One."

"I didn't realize I'd hurt you so badly, making you so hard like this." He glanced regretfully at her left hand, looking for a ring. "I see you never married."

"I'm tired of the chitchat, Jack. We need to close the deal. Or else I read you your rights, and take you in."

He sighed deeply, like a broken man who realized he'd destroyed not one life but two, and had some atoning to do. "I'll get on the phone while you're getting rid of the body. I should have the bank transfer taken care of before noon."

Felicia nodded toward the uniformed cop. "Jack, meet Charlie. He's been on the force longer than I have. He's got a daughter the same age as Rebecca."

"The wife and I would like to set up a college fund for her," Charlie said affably. "College costs an awful lot these days."

"I can take care of that," Ryan said.

"She needs braces, too."

Ryan stared at him with exasperation. "Fine, braces. Let me know how much, I'll write a check."

"I was thinking an even million," Charlie said. "In addition to the million the chief's getting."

Ryan looked at him like he was crazy.

"And another million to spread around if we need to," Felicia said. "In case the witness or anyone else threatens to raise troublesome questions. That would be three million altogether. You can put it all in one check. We'll handle it from there."

Ryan grimaced incredulously. "Three million!"

"There's that darned echo again," Charlie said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Two days later, with local shooting completed, the cast and crew of *Passing Through* packed up its cameras and other gear and moved on to the next location.

At that point, Felicia informed Ryan, the mayor's daughter was officially listed as a runaway. The locals were concerned but not that surprised, Felicia added, since the girl wouldn't be the first teenager to flee Pine Haven for a more exciting life elsewhere. Charlie reassured Ryan that he'd dug a sufficiently deep hole for the body, twenty miles out of town on private land he owned that wouldn't be disturbed for decades, if ever. The months would pass, Felicia said, and then the years, and eventually the girl named Rebecca would be forgotten by everyone except her family. By then, Charlie and Felicia would have retired and moved far away, and the missing-person case would be filed deep in a drawer somewhere, unlikely to ever be reactivated.

"*I* won't forget her," Ryan said, his eyes troubled.

He looked drawn and haggard. His concentration was shot and his performance the past two days had been second-rate. He couldn't remember his lines, and his delivery was inconsistent, off the mark. Rumors were circulating among the cast and crew that he must be on drugs. Only this morning, his director had warned him that if he didn't shape up fast, *Passing Through* would go straight to cable and DVD, without a theatrical release. Simply put, his life had become hell.

"Her face haunts me," he added pitifully. "Especially when I try to sleep."

"I'd suggest you count your blessings," Felicia said curtly, as they completed their business transaction in his room at the Pine Haven Motel. "At least you won't be facing justice. I'd also advise you to stay away from drugs, as well as young women. It's time to grow up, Jack. Let this be a wake-up call."

He nodded morosely and handed over the cashier's check he'd promised them. Awkwardly, without quite meeting their eyes, he thanked them for their help and grabbed his bags. Then he scurried down the stairs to a private helicopter waiting for him in the empty motel parking lot, like a rat running for its life.

As the chopper disappeared into a cloudless sky, Felicia and Charlie drove back to their motel cabin a few miles up the road, where they paid their bill and checked out. They climbed into the white Crown Victoria they'd rented in Boston and took off for the long trek back to Provincetown. Charlie took the wheel for the first leg of the trip, remarking on what a fine day it was for a drive. Rebecca, his eighteen-year-old daughter from his first marriage, was asleep in the backseat, and they were careful not to wake her. As they left the little town behind, Felicia unfastened the bun at the back of her head and shook her hair loose, the way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Charlie liked it. Then she slipped on her wedding ring. It felt good having it back where it belonged; she'd missed it the last few days.

"Drive safely," she said. "We wouldn't want to get pulled over by a member of the Pine Haven Police Department."

Charlie chuckled. "I don't imagine Pine Haven is big enough to have its own police force, dear."

"Or even a mayor," Felicia added, giving him a wink.

"Three million," Charlie said, whistling softly. "That's a lot of money."

"Certainly enough to build our playhouse," Felicia said, "and fund our theater group for many years to come. With enough left over to put Beck through just about any drama school she wants to attend. I guess all those years I spent with Jack Gluck weren't wasted after all."

Charlie glanced lovingly at his wife. "You were very good as the police chief, sweetie. Wonderful improvisation when it was needed. Not that I expected anything less." He imitated her voice and look, getting the hardness and cynicism just right. " 'Homicide is a serious matter, Jack.' " Charlie grinned. "All in all, I'd say it was the performance of a lifetime."

"You weren't exactly chopped liver as the cop." Felicia glanced back at her sleeping stepdaughter. "And Beck had her part down cold."

"So to speak," Charlie said, and they both laughed. "Still, it was your excellent planning that made it all possible. You mapped out every twist and turn beautifully, and wrote some great lines."

She leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. "It's like Jack said, honey."

"What's that, baby?"

Felicia smiled contentedly, gazing out the windshield at the road ahead as it led them home. "It all starts with the script." ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:

ELLERY QUEEN
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855

For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving.
Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Saga of Sidney Paar

by Jon L. Breen

"Are you Gus Twining?"

"Yes," I said.

"May we come in? We'd like to ask you a few questions."

As soon as I heard the first news reports about the murder of my old sports editor, I knew the police might come calling, but I was surprised to find them at the door of my beachfront condo that same day. They were a male-female team, Detectives Nakamura and Ortega. Neither one could have met the departmental height requirement in the old days. They both looked trim and formidable, though, not likely to be the butt of many donut jokes, and in well-cut business suits they were better dressed than the plainclothes stereotype.

"Jon L. Breen is so important as a reviewer that we forget how good a novelist he is," writer and critic Ed Gorman said of Mr. Breen's latest novel *Eye of God* (Five Star/September, 2006). We can also easily forget how good a short-story writer he is in the years that usually pass between his short-story submissions to this magazine. This year *EQMM* has three Breen stories—one still to come in the autumn.

I showed them into my study and invited them to sit down. They obviously liked the room. Nakamura, the guy, appreciated the wood grain on the paneling and furniture and the wide-angle ocean view. Ortega was drawn to the pictures lining the walls, showing me with people like Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, and Annika Sörenstam, them with golf clubs in their hands, me with a microphone. I had my dust jackets framed, too, with pride of place to the bestseller that had paid for the condo and the view.

"You have a beautiful place," Nakamura said.

"Thanks. Wish I were here more. I travel a lot."

"I enjoy your work on TV, Mr. Twining," Ortega said with an

©2007 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

almost subliminal smile.

"They say I bring a unique perspective to golf coverage." I winked, one of my TV trademarks. "I never played the game professionally or even well."

"Millard Glass was your editor when you worked for the *Chronicle*?" Nakamura asked.

"Yeah. It was years ago."

"You heard what happened to him, I guess?"

"It was on the news. Not many details, though. Shot in his office at the paper after hours, late Monday night, right?"

"Yes."

"Nobody around when he was shot?"

Ortega glanced at her partner. "Somebody was around."

"Have you found the weapon?"

"I think we'll ask the questions, Mr. Twining," Nakamura said.

"Sure. Shoot. I mean, go ahead." I smiled. They didn't. I must have seemed nervous, but I had no reason to be.

"Can you account for your movements on Monday night?"

"Yes, sure, I mean, sort of." I tried to gather my thoughts. "I can tell you where I was and what I was doing, but it's not precisely an ironclad alibi."

"You think you need an alibi, Mr. Twining?" Nakamura said.

"I didn't think so until just now. Are you saying I'm a suspect?"

"Should you be a suspect?" Ortega said, poker-faced as her partner. Oh, they were quite a team.

"No, I shouldn't."

Nakamura said, "We have to ask a lot of questions of a lot of people on any murder investigation, but it's just routine. You're not a suspect, Mr. Twining." The "yet" hung in the air unspoken.

The journalist in me wanted to ask precisely what cops meant by the word suspect—use it too loosely and it becomes a synonym for the guy who did it, even if he has no face and no name. But rather than question their semantics, I gave them a quick account of my Monday night. I'd never married and lived alone, so it was nothing anybody could vouch for.

Finally I blurted out, "Why would you suspect me? I haven't worked for Glass in ten years and I haven't even seen the guy in five. I had no reason to kill him."

"He fired you," Nakamura pointed out.

"Yeah, he fired me. Everybody gets fired at some point. Haven't you ever been fired? No, I guess not." God, I was babbling. It's unnerving to be a not-yet suspect, even when you know they have nothing on you. "Look, losing that job he fired me from put me on a course that led to all this. I couldn't have afforded this condo writing for the *Chronicle*."

"We understand you were pretty angry at the time," Ortega said.

"Sure I was. I didn't know what was in my future. All I knew was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I was out of work. Looking back, Glass did me a favor. By a month after he fired me, I wasn't mad anymore. Look, if you'll tell me a little more, maybe I can help you figure out who really offed him."

The pair looked at each other and apparently agreed on a course of action through some kind of cop telepathy.

"Glass didn't die right away," Nakamura said. "He managed to call nine-one-one, in fact, and he told the dispatcher something very interesting. He said, 'Sidney Paar killed me.' Then he spelled it: 'P-a-a-r.' Dispatcher said he kind of laughed, like it was ironic. By the time the paramedics got to him, he was dead, with his head on the desk and the phone still in his hand."

"Who else was in the building at the time?"

"A few people scattered around, but nobody close to Glass's office."

"Didn't they hear the shot?"

"Sure, but they didn't know what it was or exactly where it came from. The insulation's pretty good in that building."

"When I worked there, you had to sign in with a security man in the lobby when you entered after hours."

"You still do. The watchman, old guy named Frank, didn't sign in anybody we haven't accounted for, but he was away from the lobby a few times. Stomach flu, he said. People told us he's usually very reliable."

"He was when I was there, but he must be getting on. Anyway, couldn't the killer have been somebody in the building who *did* sign in?"

"If so, they did a good job of losing the gun."

"And I gather Sidney Paar hadn't signed in," I said, trying to be as poker-faced as they were.

"No, and he wasn't on the roster of *Chronicle* employees or in the phone book either," Ortega said. "But then some people there told us Sidney Paar could only refer to you."

I shrugged. "I see their point. Okay, I'll tell you the whole story."

When Millard Glass took me on at the *Chronicle,* it was a big step up for me. After working on a series of small-town weeklies, a medium-sized city daily looked like the *New York Times.* He was a fierce-looking little guy, usually soft-spoken but intimidating, with a reputation for periodic tantrums. For the first few weeks, he didn't have a lot to say to me; then one day he called me into his office. Dominating the room on the wall behind his desk was a huge poster of four long-ago Notre Dame football players on horseback, with the famous Grantland Rice line below the photo: "Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again . . ." Amid the clutter on the desk, I saw books by Jim Murray and Damon Runyon.

"Gus," he said, "you do good work. I like to see a writer with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sense of style for a change. That's how sports writing is supposed to be. Accurate's important, sure, but so's colorful. I don't say you're Red Smith reincarnated just yet, but you have a touch of the poet to you, know what I mean?"

"I had no idea I was so touched, but thanks, Mr. Glass."

"Now that you've been here awhile, what do you think of our sports department?"

Awkward question. How frank did he want me to be? A fair amount of the sports page came from the wire services, and some of the local stuff was the work of stringers, often high-school and college journalism students. I had only three full-time colleagues.

Lead columnist Rex Burbage was old, fat, and lazy and had been there since the year one; rumor was he had something on the publisher and couldn't be fired. Rex wrote a pretty good story when his heart was in it, but he was prone to careless mistakes. He drank a bit and liked to feature that particular reporter stereotype, but his inherent indolence went deeper than that. As a columnist, he wrote about everything, but he favored horse racing, boxing, and football.

Sally Ashe was small, cute, up for anything (at least in the journalism line), and so energetic she made you tired just watching her dart around the newsroom. A decent writer and good at breaking stories, Sally could exploit the advantages and accept the disadvantages of being an attractive young woman in a profession dominated by middle-aged, beer-bellied men. The newsroom hadn't freed itself of a long tradition of sexism, and I think even those who practiced it most constantly admired her ability to take it in stride. Her main beats were hockey, basketball, and tennis.

Bill Toolmaker was about my age, thirty, but he seemed older and not just because of the thinning hairline. His wife had some kind of degenerative disease and caring for her told on him. Bill was already a veteran on the *Chronicle* and became my closest friend there. Thanks to him, I knew where the extra office supplies were hidden, whom to call for accurate information (the university athletic director's secretary was especially good at providing deep background), and what red flags to keep off my expense account in the unlikely event I got sent out of town to cover a World Series or Super Bowl or Breeders' Cup. Bill's main beat was baseball, the local minor-league team close up, the majors at a respectful distance.

I gave a diplomatic, guarded answer to Glass's question about the *Chronicle*'s sports operation, letting him know I had my eyes open without blatantly asking why Rex was kept on. When I praised Sally's investigative talents, Glass just said, "Nice ass, huh?" When I told him Bill was clearly his best reporter, he grunted under his breath, "No style." He didn't seem that enthusiastic about anybody, apart from Darren Rademacher, a high-school

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stringer we were going to lose to Stanford the following fall. ("Kid can write. I'd hire him full-time right now. Who needs college?") He asked me what sports I would like to specialize in, where I saw the sports section going in the future, and other general questions, all very friendly and calm until I mentioned golf.

"No golf stories!" he said.

After a pause to take this outrageous statement in, I mounted a timid defense. "Mr. Glass, it's a popular sport. People like to read about it, and they're the kind of upscale readers advertisers like. There are seven courses in town. The LPGA may do a tournament stop here."

"I know all that. And I know we can't ignore it completely, all right? I run a few golf items off the wires, print the tournament standings and all that crap, but I'll be damned if I'll put any special effort into it."

"Why?"

"To begin with, it's not a sport. Or if it is a sport, the guys who play it aren't athletes."

"Mr. Glass," I blurted, "just last week you ran a front-page article on a chess tournament."

He gave me a hard stare. "It was a slow news day, and there was a lot of human interest in that story. Read my lips, Twining. No golf."

At this point in my service at the *Chronicle,* I was not yet brave enough to press the point further, so I got off the subject of golf, and our meeting returned to a state of calm.

When I got back to the sports staff's corner of the newsroom, all three of my colleagues were waiting for me. It seemed a one-on-one with the boss was a rare occurrence and they wanted to hear all about it. I gave them a selective account.

Rex Burbage, gnawing the edge of a dripping cheeseburger, said, "I think we should have warned him off the g-word, huh, guys?"

"Probably should have," Bill Toolmaker agreed with a slight smile.

"Oh, Gus, you poor baby," said Sally Ashe. "Millard hates golf. Never propose a story on golf, never even mention golf, and you'll get along fine."

"Why does he hate it so much?"

"Maybe he played once," Bill offered. "That does it for some people."

Rex wagged his head. "That ain't it. I don't like to play myself. Nineteenth hole's okay, but the first eighteen you can have. But I still enjoy it. The constant frustration is what makes golf fun to write about. It humbles even the greatest. Years ago, I was on another paper, I got a whole story out of Arnold Palmer shooting a twelve."

"On how many holes?" I said.

"One. A septuple bogey, I think it was."

"You don't write about golf at this paper, Rex," Sally pointed out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rex smiled, showing remnants of cheeseburger. "Hey, you guys may think my job is safe, but even I ain't that brave. As to why Millard hates golf so much, search me. I know where most of the bodies are buried around here, but not that one."

Bill said, "Maybe there is no explanation. I can't stand green olives, but there's no deep hidden reason for it."

"That you know of," Sally said. "And you don't go off like a rocket when anybody mentions olives. Anybody know anything about Millard's father? Maybe he was destroyed by golf. Some people get addicted to it. Maybe he was a golfaholic."

"Say, honey," Rex said, "that hits too close to home." And he waddled back to his desk, where he may (as self-fed legend claimed) or may not have had a selection of miniature airline booze bottles in his locked bottom drawer.

For the next few months, I was the utility man of the sports page, writing on football, baseball, basketball, auto racing, horse racing, track and field, trying to invest them all with the kind of colorful writing Millard Glass was looking for. It paid off. Glass gave me a raise to something approaching a living wage and a column of my own. I started to get those out-of-town assignments. None of my colleagues seemed jealous of my growing status—even Rex congratulated me, despite (or maybe because of) his own column getting cut back to three a week. The sports page was on an upswing. Glass goosed the budget to hire two new reporters, both with the kind of stylistic flair he liked.

Whatever else happened, we still didn't cover golf beyond the bare minimum. One day I was sitting at my desk looking at the first-round scores of the latest PGA tournament. I'm sure you know that for every hole on a golf course, the number of strokes a capable golfer should take to get the ball in the hole, three, four, or five of them, is called par. Add them all up, and you have par for the course, which for 18 holes usually comes to 70, 71, or in the case of this tournament, 72. I'm looking at this list, and I see the leader (let's say it was Vijay Singh) shot a 64, meaning he was eight under par. A bunch of others also shot under par, a few even par 72, and a few more over par. The worst round (terrible for a touring pro but great for a duffer) might be a 78 or 79. Thinking out loud to the room at large, I said, "How would a golfer do on the PGA tour if he shot par on every single round he played, all year long?"

"Not well," said Sally Ashe.

"No, he'd do okay," said Rex Burbage. "He'd make some money. Almost every tournament some guys finish well over par for four rounds, and they get paid."

"He'd have to make the cut to play on the weekend," Bill Toolmaker pointed out. The typical PGA tournament goes four rounds, Thursday through Sunday, but the field is reduced after the sec-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ond round, and those eliminated go home empty-handed. "Par doesn't always make the cut."

"He could even win one," Sally said, apparently rethinking her snap judgment. "I mean, if the weather was bad enough and most people were shooting in the high 70s and 80s, a guy who shot par could actually come out on top."

"Cory Pavin won a U.S. Open shooting par," Bill said. "Doesn't happen often, though."

By this time I was feeling secure enough at the *Chronicle* to propose a harmless hoax. We would invent a fictitious golfer named Sidney Paar and stick him in the standings for each weekly tournament. He would shoot par for every single round. If par didn't make the cut, he would disappear on the weekend. If par made the cut, he would finish the tournament and we'd credit him with the appropriate prize money. Anybody who follows golf would be bound to catch on quickly, but it would be fun to see how long it would take our golf-hating editor to figure it out.

When I described my plan, Bill Toolmaker said, "I think I speak for all of us when I say that is an inspired idea, and when Millard Glass finds out, none of us knows a thing about it."

I shrugged. "Millard has a sense of humor. Sort of. And he likes color and creativity, doesn't he? I'll be in charge of sticking Sidney in the standings every week, and, right, none of you know anything about it."

I never figured the joke would last beyond the second weekend. Millard would find out, maybe laugh and maybe not, and instruct me to knock it off. But the career of Sidney Paar lasted through the summer, shooting par for every round in every tournament. Every golfer reading the paper had to be on to the gag, but nobody felt obliged to tell the sports editor.

"Millard has to know," I said to Bill in the newsroom one afternoon. "How could he not? He must just think it's funny, and he's letting it go on, not saying anything."

Bill shook his head. "Remember, the guy hates golf. He pays no attention to it. Sidney's name only appears in a long column of names Millard has no interest in. You've never inserted our boy in an actual news story, have you?"

I shook my head.

"There you are. He may glance at the editorial content, but he sure doesn't look at the tournament standings. Believe me, Millard knows nothing about it."

"How will he react if he finds out?"

"When it's gone on this long, I think we can confidently say he'll be royally pissed." Bill smirked at me. "Fortunately, you'll remember, I never look at those golf standings myself, and when your perfidy is revealed to the world, I'll be as shocked as anybody."

As the year went on, the pressure built up. I was starting to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worry. Was my position on the paper really secure enough to weather the fallout? Of course, it was always possible the whole year would go by without Millard catching on. And if Sidney didn't make enough on the tour to qualify the following year, I'd have to drop him, wouldn't I? Only one thing could guarantee Millard would find out: if Sidney got high enough on the leader board that he'd have to be mentioned in a story. But I could finesse that unless (gulp!) a score of par actually won a tournament.

As I guess you've figured by now, that's exactly what happened. High winds struck an East-Coast tournament in late summer. Scores were high the first day and only got worse as the tournament went on. After Saturday, Sidney Paar would have been sitting two strokes off the lead, and at the end of Sunday, his closest competitor was two behind him. Sidney was a winner.

What could I do? If par had won the tournament, I could have had Sidney lose in a playoff, but then I'd have had to fake the wire story. That would have compromised my journalistic ethics, if I hadn't already nuked them with the hoax to begin with. When Sunday's results were printed in Monday morning's paper, Sidney unaccountably disappeared from the leader board and some other guy, Retief Goosen, I think it was, was credited with the winner's purse. Ironically, it was a call to the sports editor from a little old lady who thought Sidney was real that finally revealed the truth to Millard Glass. She had started following Sidney's progress because Paar had been her mother's maiden name or she used to watch Jack Paar on TV or something.

When I heard Millard had found out, I felt a combination of relief and dread. All that day I waited for the axe to fall. Clearly wanting to make things as miserable for me as possible, he waited until nine o'clock that night to order me to meet him at his office. The session wasn't pleasant.

"Lying to your readers is not the guiding principle of journalism on this paper," he said, his voice lowered, the calm before the storm.

"It was just a joke, Millard."

"Not very funny."

"No, I suppose not. But try to think of it as a statistical experiment. A lot of readers wondered, like I did, how a golfer would do who shot only par."

"I didn't hire you to run experiments on my sports page," Millard said, voice rising. "Maybe you'd like to take your test tubes and Bunsen burner to the unemployment office!" He was getting into it now. He really liked to yell. And yeah, I contributed to the noise pollution a bit myself.

The upshot of all our yelling: I was out on the street. Was I mad at Millard Glass? At that moment, sure. Did I want to kill the guy? For a few hours, maybe. But within a week, things started to turn around for me. I got an offer from a golf magazine to write up my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sidney Paar hoax. They paid me well, they asked me for some more articles, I got a book contract, and I got interviewed on TV flogging my book, as a result of which I got an offer to join the network's golf-commentary team. My stock was rising like dot-coms in the bubble.

Here's the kicker. When the magazine with my Sidney Paar article came out, I sent a copy to Millard Glass with a conciliatory note. And he replied with an e-mail: "Nice piece. And I do get it now. But I still hate golf." So you see, we weren't enemies. Whoever the Sidney Paar was who killed him, he wasn't referring to me.

When I finished the story, the two cops looked at me impassively, absorbing it. Finally Ortega said, "So who was he referring to if not you?"

"Let's kick that around a little," I said, inviting myself in on their investigation. "Maybe he was incriminating somebody who reminded him of Sidney Paar in some way. Or it could be it was an indirect reference, that he thought the Sidney Paar hoax somehow set in motion the events that led to his death."

"If it's something that subtle," Nakamura said, "what was the point of telling the nine-one-one operator? Glass was dying and saying what he said was the most important thing to him. He was sending a message. I think he was trying to tell us who killed him."

"He was sending a message, all right, but maybe not to you."

"You'll have to explain that."

"It's the kind of thing that always bothers me in stories. If he's trying to tell you who killed him, why make it so damned cryptic? It's not as if he was writing something down, and he feared the killer would come back and find it. What he said to the nine-one-one dispatcher would be safely recorded away from the crime scene. Why get cute and attribute the crime to Sidney Paar, a guy who didn't even exist? Why not just say the killer's name?"

"You tell us," Ortega said.

"Millard didn't think he needed to identify his killer. He was sure the person who shot him would be caught. The killer only got away through a freak of luck. Millard didn't know Frank's stomach flu would keep him out of the lobby. I think he was sending a message to his murderer, an in-your-face way of letting the killer know with what contempt Millard regarded him."

They looked unconvinced, but Nakamura asked me, "You have anybody particular in mind?"

"No, not really," I said.

After the cops left, I decided to do a little detecting on my own. Not any that involved leaving the condo—running into Ortega and Nakamura again in the course of their own investigation might prove awkward—but through a twenty-first-century combination of Internet and old-fashioned land-line telephone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

First I did Google searches on all my old colleagues. Sally, as I expected, produced the most hits. As I already knew, she had joined me in the visual-media world, working as a sideline reporter on college football games. Perfect job for her, always more impressive in person than in print. Rex and Bill were both still at the *Chronicle* and some of their stories were accessible on the paper's Web site. Surprisingly, the tribute to the fallen sports editor wasn't written by either Rex or Bill but by Darren Rademacher, that kid who had gone to Stanford for four years and joined the sports staff when he came back. One paragraph held special interest for me:

"Millard Glass never stopped expanding his horizons as an editor and a man. When I proposed an interview with my fellow Stanford alum Tiger Woods, he said it was the first golf story he had okayed in years. He had never cared for the game until he started to see it as a metaphor for life."

Now I was sure my first guess had been right: The killer reminded him of Sidney. From there it was easy. What were the characteristics of Sidney Paar the golfer? Steady, reliable, unspectacular, and ultimately a little boring. Sidney could never surprise you. It fit one of my old colleagues like a glove.

The first call I made was to Sally. She was a celebrity now, and if I hadn't been in TV sports myself, I probably couldn't have gotten to her. Chances were, the police hadn't talked to her yet.

"Sally, after I left, did Millard Glass ever mention the name Sidney Paar?"

"One time he did. It was at some party, the only time I ever ran into him away from the office. He was a little drunk, a lot more talkative than normal, and I seemed to be one of the few people there he knew. So he kind of monopolized me. Some of the stuff he said was way off the wall. He looked me up and down—guys do, I'm used to it—and told me if I could get my boobs or my legs into a story for the paper, I'd be sensational."

"He didn't say that!"

"He sure did. Sexist pig, huh? I let it slide, but how do you think it affected me?"

"It could have affected you into a sexual-harassment suit."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Not my style. Weirdly enough, it kept me at the paper a year or two longer than I would have stayed otherwise. If it weren't for that crack, I would have moved into TV sooner than I did, but I was stubborn. I didn't want to prove my old sexist editor right! Maybe he'd heard I'd had offers and wanted to keep me, used reverse psychology. That made it a compliment, huh?"

"But what did that have to do with Sidney Paar?"

"Not a thing. But that same evening he confided to me a bunch of stuff about the people on the paper. There was one colleague of ours Millard had always wanted to get rid of. But he could never

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

find an excuse. He was cooperative. He got along with everybody. He always met his deadlines. His work was always accurate. He was a damn good reporter. He could do anything perfectly but write a lively sentence. He did his job by the numbers, no style, no flair, no originality, none of those things Millard admired. He was Sidney Paar."

"And after these messages, you'll tell me who that was," I said playfully.

"Gus, you know who it was. I don't have to tell you."

Rex Burbage added to the story. "He finally screwed something up. He attributed an inflammatory quote to a coach that some other coach said. It was embarrassing, and the wronged coach even threatened a libel suit. Millard was livid, wanted his head. I think he was ready to fire him, but he didn't."

"Are you sure he didn't?"

"What do you mean?"

"What did Millard do when he wanted to fire somebody?"

"You should know better than anybody."

I decided to talk to my third former colleague face-to-face. Bill offered me a drink, and we sat in his den.

"Did you hear about Millard's supposed dying message—'Sidney Paar killed me.'?"

"I hope you had an alibi, Gus."

"Didn't need one. Sorry to hear about your little problem at the paper."

"It'll blow over. We printed a retraction. Coach cooled off. Everybody makes mistakes."

"But you were famous for not making them, Bill. I guess with Millard's death, they'll need a new sports editor now, huh?"

"I really hadn't thought about it."

"That surprises me. You'd be a natural choice. How's your wife?"

"About the same. Good days, bad days."

"Did you cover your tracks, Bill? Can they trace the gun to you? Did you expect to get away with killing Millard?"

"I didn't go there to kill him."

"But you carried a gun."

"City streets, late at night. It's just prudent."

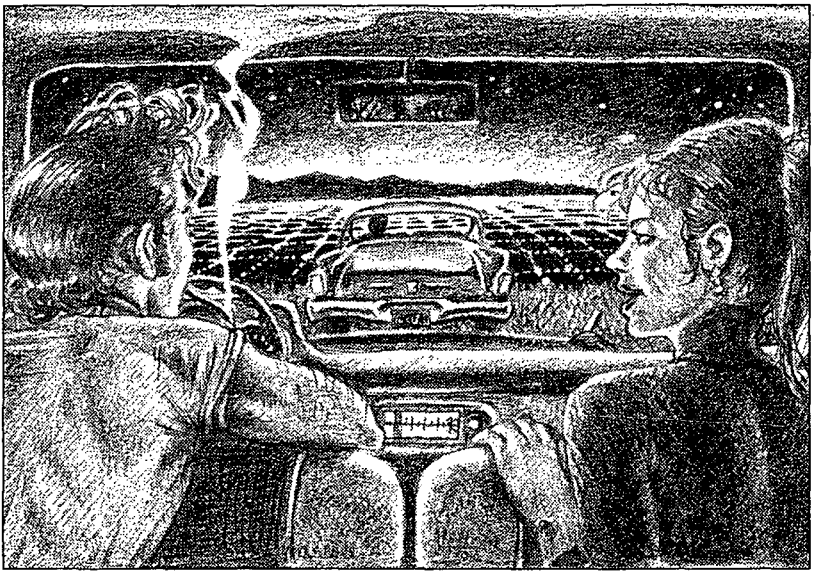
"You knew what Millard used those late-night meetings for. And even if Frank hadn't been sick, you had every right to be in the building. If Millard hadn't told anybody else he intended to fire you, you could probably get away with it. I'll bet you covered your tracks well. I'll bet you expect to get away with it even if I tell the police you're Sidney Paar."

"I am?"

"Think about it."

He looked at me sadly. "I'm not Sidney. Not anymore. I got a bogey." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Jason Eckhardt

Over the Edge

by James H. Cobb

The topic was the evolution of the American hot rod, as seen by my friend and automotive mentor, Kevin Pulaski.

"Back in the Midwest when I was a kid, the serious speed hounds all ran roadsters: T-bolts, Model A's, or Deuces. The bad gassers, the souped-up, later-model coupes and two-door sedans, didn't start taking over until after I'd moved out to the coast in the 'fifties."

"Why'd it change, Kev?"

"A lot of reasons. More powerful overhead valve engines, better suspension systems. Streamlining started to count, and you had a little more metal around you in a crackup."

A reminiscent smile crossed his weathered features. "And, man, then there were the backseats, those big ol' chair car backseats."

Somewhere a bird twirped sluggishly and you could see the San Gabriel range just outlining against the gray predawn. It was the dying end of a way long night.

We'd parked a block back so the rumble of the '57's beefed-up engine wouldn't telegraph our approach, and the click of Lisette's

©2007 by James H. Cobb

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Italian heels counterpointed the scuff of my boots as we hiked in along the access road. I'd tried to send the Princess home in a cab, but she'd bucked over that trace. She'd been there at the start. She'd be there when it finished.

The house was space-age circular, all curved glass and pastel tiling, a flying saucer landed in the Hollywood Hills and spying on the city below. It was the perfect pad for a hip young bachelor in a world full of promise. There was a flagstone patio, a view that would stretch out to the Pacific, a barbeque grill, and a two-car garage. No pool yet, but it was probably coming.

Series character Kevin Pulaski has appeared in three previous *EQMM* stories, and in the novel *West on 66*, published by St. Martin's Press (paperback '01). His creator, James H. Cobb, is also a prolific thriller writer, author of several titles in the Amanda Garrett technothriller series from G.P. Putnam, and of *The Arctic Event*, the latest book in Robert Ludlum's Covert One series, scheduled for September 2007 release. ✝

We swung over the low stone wall that circled the compound, Lisette swearing under her breath as she struggled with her tapered skirt. Hunkering in the deeper shadow behind a big bougainvillea bush, we did our best raccoon imitations.

The pad's bachelor was in residence and scared of the dark. Lamps glowed behind the drawn curtains and the patio lights glared.

"You find the garbage can," I whispered. "I want another look at his car."

"How come I get the glamour job?" she hissed back.

"Hey, Princess, you wanted in on this posse, remember? And you don't hear Jay Silverheels bitching to Clayton Moore about his job assignments."

I felt a baleful look aimed at me. "The Lone Ranger doesn't get to make out with Tonto, either!"

"This is Hollywood. You might be surprised."

I had pretty much all I needed, but there were a last couple of nails I wanted for the coffin. Keeping low, I crossed to the rear of the garage. The T-handle on the sliding door resisted a moment, then turned. He'd been convenient and hadn't locked up.

I eased the door up a couple of feet and rolled under. The interior of the garage was stuffy with the waste heat radiating from a big block engine. The car sitting in the darkness matched the pad, a sleek '58 Pontiac Bonneville Convertible, fresh off the showroom floor. The top was up, but the driver's window was rolled down. It took only a moment's groping to reach through and find the faint,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lingering patch of dampness on the backseat. That was one.

Outside, Lisette whistled a soft two-tone.

I rolled under the garage door once more and circled to where the Princess had made her find. A hip young bachelor couldn't have his garbage can just sitting out in front of God and everybody. His was concealed behind a bamboo screen between the garage and the property wall. I shoved the screen aside and, preserving the prints, I eased the lid off the can, using the crooked tip of my little finger. The lid clattered a little as I set it aside. I used a quick flare of my cigarette lighter to examine the can's contents. There was the other.

"And?" the Princess whisper-demanded.

"He's dead." I didn't bother to speak softly. I didn't much care if he heard us now.

Nearby I heard a sliding glass door rumble open on its tracks. "Is anyone out there?" a voice demanded.

I unzipped my windcheater, clearing the gun shoved under my belt. I didn't think it would be one for the shooting board, but you never knew.

It was a notch bulldozer-carved into the flank of the Santa Monica hills, a future home development site for confident folks who didn't believe in brush fires and earthquakes.

But on the previous evening, it had just been a boss place to go parking.

The lights of the L.A. basin rolled away from the foot of the Santa Monicas like a Persian carpet of stars and the air was warm, even at half past midnight. Half a dozen couple-occupied cars sat spaced out along the unfenced edge of the overlook and half a dozen low-playing car radios intermingled in a sensual whisper.

"Earth Angel" by the Crew-Cuts issued from the darkened interior of the '46 Ford, and, given the way the old sedan was slow-dancing on its suspension, I was about to put my foot right through one of those "moments to remember." Too bad, but then my night had been bitched as well.

I rapped on the rear fender. "Hey, Gilly. I need words with you, man."

There was a muffled explosion of profanity from the Ford's backseat, a lot of it shrill and feminine. I withdrew politely to the back bumper, giving the involved time to pull down, zip up, and tuck in. A minute or so later Gilly Bristol backed out of the driver's side rear door whispering frantic apologies to the backseat's other occupant.

He scuffled back to where I was parked on his back bumper, a lean, dark-haired kid fighting the good fight against acne. Like me, he was clad in the uniform of the day, Levis and a white

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

T-shirt. "Jesus, Kev," he moaned, drooping down on the bumper. "I was on second and slidin' for third!"

As a responsible adult I should have lectured him on respecting his young lady's reputation and saving himself for marriage, but then if Gilly had viewed me as a responsible adult, he probably wouldn't be talking to me. Beyond that, if he was old enough to fink for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, he was old enough for a lot of other stuff.

Bristol owed me. I'd finagled him out of six months in the county youth farm on a joyriding rap and now he was making it even.

"My heart bleeds, man," I replied, "but I been chasin' you around these hills for half the friggin' night. The word from the bird is you got me a name."

"Yeah." I saw his silhouette nod. "Tod Carroll, a senior at my school. He drives a red '*fifty*-four Chevy convert and lives in that new development above Brentwood. I got you somethin' else, too."

Gilly dug in his pocket and came up with a twist of Kleenex. Through the tissue I could feel a cluster of capsules and flat, dime-sized tablets. "The goofballs go for a dollar and the bennies are fifty cents a pop," he reported. "Carroll makes the scene at all the parties around here on the weekends."

"You got anything on his connection?"

"Nah, but his old man owns that big drugstore in the shopping center off Stone Canyon."

"You think his old man could be part of the action?"

The kid shrugged. "I dunno, daddy-o. I'm only in good enough to buy from the guy. But he's always holding."

I'd already gotten a bearing on the Carroll kid from another of my high-school stoolies. This nailed it down. "Okay. Now you back way the hell off. From here on, this Carroll guy is strictly radio-active. Stay away from him! Got it?"

"Got it."

I stowed the drugs in my jeans and drew the ten bucks I'd had ready. "You did good, man. Go buy your chick a deal for her charm bracelet."

Gilly absorbed the pair of Lincolns and I could see his grin glint in the dark. Then his grin faded as we felt an angry flounce radiate from the Ford's backseat. "Oh man, I'm gonna be startin' from home plate again."

"Then you better get swingin' before your battery goes dead."

I circled wide around the other parkers, keeping my footsteps light on the compacted gravel. Car, my bad Black Widow Chev, sat out near the road in a deeper puddle of night beneath a 'dozer-spared smoke tree. The view was almost as good and the privacy was better. The glowing tip of a Fatima extra-length hovered in the front seat. "And?" a soft voice inquired over the Nat King Cole Trio.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lisette wears shadow well. With her glossy brunette ponytail and black sweater and skirt she was a darker patch of dark in the dark, a glint of silver earring marking her place.

"A bad or a worse." The Princess materialized for a moment under Car's dome light as I slid in behind the wheel, her shoes kicked off and her feet tucked under her. She disappeared again as I slammed the door and let the night flood back. "The bad's a kid ripping off his old man's drugstore to sell to his classmates. The worse is the old man's supplying."

I took an envelope and a pencil stub out of the glove compartment. Switching on the dome light again, I sealed the drugs in the envelope and wrote the time, date, and location on the outside. My name and my badge number, L.A. County 748, went over the sealed flap.

I tossed the envelope back into the glove box. Tomorrow it and my report would go to narcotics detail and I'd be out of it. That's how plainclothes intelligence works. Somebody else makes the busts. You just set 'em up to be knocked down.

Killing the dome light, I took a Lucky out of the soft pack crushed under the sun visor. Stealing the butt end of Lisette's Fatima, I lit up from it and slouched lower, staring at the city lights. This was supposed to have been a night out with my girl, but then Gilly had left word at my contact number.

I was just damn lucky Lisette Kingman wasn't a regular kind of a girl.

She slid across the seat, flowing around the Tornado floor shifter and demanding an arm be put around her, letting me know she didn't mind her evening being messed up.

The Princess is my lover, my best friend, my sometimes extremely unofficial partner, and a mystery I've never been able to solve. Why should a true and righteous living doll like her waste her time with a four-hundred-and-fifty-dollar-a-month deputy sheriff when she could do a hell of a lot better by strolling into the bar of the Beverly Hilton and crooking a finger?

Sure, I'd gotten her out of a jam once, that crazy deal out on Route 66, but it wasn't as if she owed me. As I ran my hand down her warm cashmere-sheathed flank I again decided it was just dumb luck and that I should shut up and ride it while it lasted.

"You're thinking again," she murmured, her chin propped on my shoulder.

"I am?"

"Yes, and knock it off," she accused. "When you think too much you always think yourself into the mullygrubbles and you get boring when you get the mullygrubbles."

"There were two bad habits my folks could never break me of, biting my nails and thinking."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She snuggled insistently. "What you need is to channel all of that thinking into a more constructive vein."

"Like what?"

Turnabout being fair play, she stole my Lucky Strike for a puff, returning it with a hint of lipstick flavoring. "Like all of the intriguing things that must be going on in these other cars."

There might be something to that, given that these other parkers probably hadn't come up here to discuss the Missile Gap.

"Well, let's see," says I. "My buddy, Gilly, down at the far end, is probably still trying to recover from a foul ball."

"Called Kevin Pulaski!" Lisette chuckled in the dark. "That was cruel!"

"What can I say, Princess, life's a bitch and then you die. That couple next to him in the 'fifty-six Dodge ragtop are nonstarters. You can see where their heads are. All they're hugging are the door handles. The girl must have her sweater, a purse, and a coil of barbed wire stacked in the middle of the seat. . . . The MG-TD, man, I don't even want to think about that. They gotta be contortionists. . . . They're set up in that big Nash Metro, though. It looks like a bathtub and drives like a cow but the front seat folds flat into the back to make a full-sized double bed. They got it made."

A set of sharp little teeth lightly nipped through the fabric of my T-shirt. "How does a nineteen fifty-seven Chevrolet compare?"

As if she didn't know. Another aspect of the Princess's rather exotic personality was that she found the combination of starlight and General Motors upholstery stimulating.

Maybe this night was only half shot after all.

Gale Storm was asking "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" when a new set of headlights turned in from the road and gravel crunched under tires. "More customers?" Lisette murmured, her voice kiss-muffled.

"If it's a sheriff's cruiser, I'll pull rank."

A low-slung coupe pulled up to a clear spot on the edge of the overlook about fifteen yards ahead of us, its driver possibly not even aware that Car was parked back here. I ran an instinctive automobile ID on the silhouette outlined against the city lights, a Studebaker Golden Hawk, a year or two old.

"Some other people with the same excellent idea," the Princess chuckled, brushing back a tousle of hair.

Then the driver of the Hawk lit a smoke, using a Ronson and not the car lighter. The momentary burst of flame light glinted off upswept blond hair. The driver was a woman and she was alone.

Lisette straightened a little, her Siamese cat's curiosity kicking in. "That's interesting. I wonder what she's doing up here by her lonesome?"

"Meeting someone?"

"Maybe. But from her hairstyle, she's older, at least up in her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

twenties. Old enough to have her own apartment or at least to be going with a man who has one."

I mentally added my own car-guy's assessment. You drove a Golden Hawk for style, not just for going places. It was a young sophisticate's car. And a Studebaker is a definite step up from your basic Ford, Chevy, or Plymouth. The blonde would have the dough for her own place or at least for a good motel room.

"Maybe she's inspired by car seats too?" I mused.

"Maybe, or maybe we have a genuine illicit rendezvous underway." Lisette nuzzled into a more comfortable observing position. "What do you want to bet one or the other or both of them will be married? Just not to each other."

"You've been reading *Peyton Place* again, haven't you?"

It had only been a couple of minutes, but the cigarette shot out the Hawk's open driver's window, striking sparks off the ground. But after only a brief pause the lighter snapped once more. This time we caught a glimpse of a classic profile in the flame, the blonde's movements abrupt and angry.

Lisette giggled. "Somebody is late and somebody isn't happy about it."

"Yeah, and somebody's gonna catch hell for it," I replied, playing with the tip of the Princess's ponytail. This was getting as good as the drive-in. All we needed was a bag of popcorn.

A few moments later another car pulled into the overlook, a big new Pontiac convertible with its top down. It drew in tight alongside the Golden Hawk, flared its brake lights, and shut down.

You could barely make out the outlines of the two vehicles and the suggestion and sound of someone getting out of the Pontiac. The dome light of the Studebaker flashed on as a man got in the passenger-side door: white male adult, late twenties; dark, carefully combed hair; a blue sports coat. You caught a radiated sense of not happy.

"You know, I think this isn't exactly a romantic rendezvous," Lisette commented.

"No, if it was, she would have got into the Poncho. More room, and the Stude's got bucket seats. This has more of a 'Honey it's been wonderful but' kind of a feel."

"Could be." Lisette switched off our radio. Even at that, they must have been keeping things low-key. Only once or twice did we hear a hint of a raised voice over the sounds of the other parkers' music.

Time passed and the Princess and I lost interest in the couple in the Golden Hawk and resumed it with each other. I was lost in the intricacies of a new-model bra catch when I heard the Studebaker's door open again. I glanced up to see movement between the two darkened cars.

A moment later the Golden Hawk's engine started and its pas-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

senger door slammed. The driver's door on the Bonneville opened and shut as well, then the larger vehicle fired up. The Pontiac shot backward out of its parking place, not quite clipping Car's bumper. Its headlights blazed on as it slued around and tore out onto the highway, spraying a double roostertail of gravel behind it. The smaller Studebaker continued to sit at the edge of the turnout, lights off and its engine muttering disconsolately.

"I don't think that went too well," I said.

"Mmmm, no," the Princess murmured judgmentally. "That'll be a five-pound-box-of-chocolates-and-a-dozen-roses makeup."

"At least. Anyway, it looks like the show's over."

"Are you kidding?" Lisette snapped the radio back on and slipped her bared arms around my neck. "It's just starting, my pet."

Time and music flowed past: Santos and Johnny's "Sleepwalking," Patti Page's "Tennessee Waltz," the theme from *Moulin Rouge,* and the Four Aces' "Three Coins in the Fountain." The final tropical-bird squawk from Martin's Denny's "Quiet Village" faded and the station break for the one o'clock news broke the spell. The first thing I noticed upon returning to Earth was the continuing idle of the Studebaker engine.

There were only two or three cars left in the turnout, and the Golden Hawk was one of them. Its driver was still just sitting there. My cop's alarm bells, suppressed for a time, started ringing.

The Princess caught my mood change. "What's wrong?" she asked, coming up to peer over the seat back. With her sweater and skirt lost somewhere in Car's interior, she was a paler shadow against the seat covers.

"I don't know. The blonde in the Golden Hawk's still out there. She must be thinking awfully hard about something."

And then the blonde must have made up her mind about whatever it was, because she slowly and deliberately drove her car off the edge of the overlook and into the canyon below, drowning out the night music with the crash and crumple of buckling steel.

A suicide gets worked like a homicide until you're sure it isn't. The pleasant darkness had been replaced by the glare of work lights and headlights and the murmur of romantic radio had been supplanted by the hiss and chatter of police two-ways.

Sheriff's Search and Rescue had brought in their Dodge deuce-and-a-half with the heavy lift A-frame. A regular wrecker wouldn't have had the hundred-and-fifty-foot reach to get to the bottom of the ravine. They were walking the hook down to the demolished Golden Hawk as the lab and coroner's crews finished up at the crash site.

Assistant Coroner Michael O'Doul wheezed his way over the edge of the turnout followed by a couple of deputies carrying a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sheet-wrapped form on a stretcher. Miss Dorothy Kurtz, white female adult, age thirty-two, blond, green eyes, 5'3", approximately 130 pounds, former resident of Santa Monica.

I'd found her purse in the wreck. There had been no suicide note.

Mortuary Mike's beefy features were streaked with sweat and dust and he had grass seeds stuck in his moustache.

"What do you think, man?" I asked

"It won't be official until she's posted," he replied, "but eyeballing it, I'd say death by asphyxiation from a crushed larynx."

I nodded. "It probably happened when she did the piledriver into the wash at the bottom of the slope. You could see where the upper arc of the steering wheel caught her right across the throat."

"The car didn't roll or torch, that's something anyway," Mike mused. "She was a real good-looking woman."

Mortuary Mike had a somewhat different view of the fairer sex. Most of the girls he met were on the quiet side.

A couple of blue serge suits crossed to where the deputies were preparing to load the body into the ambulance. "Hold the body here for a minute, O'Doul. We got somebody coming up to make a positive ID."

"You got a relative?" I asked.

"Nah, a boyfriend. A Dr. Ned Freemont. He interns at the hospital where she worked."

"Does this Dr. Freemont stand about five eleven with dark hair and does he drive a new Pontiac ragtop?" I asked.

These guys were Homicide Detectives, capital H, capital D, while I was just a pathetic little silver badge working drugs & juvenile for Metro intelligence. I should have genuflected, but the mood wasn't on me.

"Yeah, Pulaski, he does. He also admits meeting the girl up here tonight. But he's also got a solid alibi. At the time the lady was taking her high dive he was sitting in a cocktail lounge on Melrose in front of a swarm of witnesses. We've checked and the bartender remembers him. We've also talked to the other couples who were up here and their stories all match with yours and his. It's a suicide."

I glanced at the sheet-wrapped shape on the stretcher. "Yeah, I guess so."

Still . . .

Lisette hovered at the edge of the light pool, listening intently. Her hair was ordered, her lipstick touched up, and there wasn't a hint that her lingerie was still wadded up under Car's front seat.

Well, hardly a hint anyway.

The shorter and uglier of the blue suits openly ogled her unconfined curves. "By the way, Pulaski," he said, leering in word and deed, "just what were you doing up here tonight?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If he was hoping for a maidenly blush and a lowering of the eyes, he was shopping at the wrong store. The Princess had never been embarrassed over anything she'd ever done, up to and including planning a mob hit on her own stepfather. "He was being the living end, darling," she replied, snorting Fatima smoke. "The absolute living end."

Short and ugly lost his leer and his taller partner screwed his puss into something resembling a grin. Heck, who was I to argue?

At that moment, a familiar Pontiac Bonneville pulled off the highway and drew in behind the row of sheriff's cruisers and emergency vehicles. The convertible's top was up now.

Behind us, the winch on the lifter truck started to moan and chatter.

A uniformed deputy led Dr. Ned Freemont over to where we were standing. I recognized the dark hair, not so carefully styled now, and the expensive sports coat. The intern was boyishly handsome but trying to look older. The late Miss Kurtz might have had a good five years on him. An interesting combo. And you could sense this wasn't any kind of struggling young medical student. He was coming from money, heading into money. He looked shook and his college-grad features were darkening under his next-day's beard.

We did the ritualistic flashing of the tin and I let the homicide guys make the equally ritualistic apologies for getting the doctor out at this hour. Then came the request to have a look under the sheet.

She looked even older. They usually do dead.

Freemont gritted his teeth. "Yes, that's Dorothy."

The lead homicide man gave Mike O'Doul the nod to load up. "I hope you understand we've got some questions to ask, Doctor. We found your name in the young woman's address book and several . . . personal pieces of correspondence from you in her purse. Deputy Pulaski has also identified you as being up here and speaking with Miss Kurtz shortly before her death. Do you have anything to say about that?"

His face twisted. "Only that this mess was my fault. Dorothy . . . Miss Kurtz called my house earlier this evening. She asked, demanded, that I meet her at this overlook. We'd come here before. It was a favorite place for her."

"You had a relationship with Miss Kurtz?"

Freemont nodded. "We worked the same shift at Hollywood Receiving Hospital and we'd dated off and on for a while. It was just casual, from my point of view anyway. But Dorothy saw it differently. When I saw things were getting too serious, I tried to break it off, but she didn't take it well. She'd developed this fixation . . . about us. About our getting married. . . ."

He glanced at the sheet-wrapped body sliding into the back of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the big Buick ambulance. "It was my fault. I never should have let it happen."

"Did she ever give you a hint she was planning on wasting herself, Doc?" Crude on my part, yeah, but I was curious to see how he'd take it.

He just looked at me, suffering like a basset hound. "No! Of course not! If she had I'd have done things differently! I'd have gotten her professional help! As it was, I came up here tonight to tell her, once and for all, it was over, that marriage just wasn't in the books! Dorothy became upset, frenzied, but I swear to God she never said a word about suicide."

The Princess and I swapped thoughtful glances. In Lisette's outburst of erotic snoopiness, she'd turned our radio off to see if we could hear anything from the interior of the Golden Hawk. If anyone had been flipping out, they'd been damn quiet about it.

"There didn't seem to be any reason to draw it out further," Freemont continued. "I had my say and I left. I was feeling pretty lousy about the situation and I stopped for a couple of drinks on the way home. I'd just gotten back to my place when the sheriff's office called."

He gestured vaguely after the departing ambulance. "I swear, Officers, I never expected . . . imagined this!" His voice broke. "I would have done something . . . helped her!"

"These things happen, Doctor," the senior homicide man said. "You might as well go on home. You'll be required to appear and testify at the coroner's inquest. You'll be notified as to the time and location."

"Thank you, Officers." He got his voice back under control. "You'll have my full cooperation."

He squared his shoulders manfully and walked back to the Bonneville.

"That's it?" I said as he pulled away. "You're not taking this Clyde in for a shakedown?"

"Why the hell make more trouble for him or us?" the senior dick replied. "He's being straight up about the whole thing. He was going with a squirrelly dame, he broke it off, and she took a high dive. It won't be the first time."

"I know. That's what's bothering me!" I snapped back. "Am I the only one here getting the feel we're reading from a friggin' script?"

The homicide man looked annoyed. "Look, was this guy anywhere near the scene when the death occurred?"

"No."

"Was anyone near the Kurtz woman's car before it went off the edge?"

I could see where this was heading. "No."

He had a point. I might have been, uh, distracted, during the time frame leading up to the woman's death, but during the criti-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cal couple of minutes immediately before the Studebaker had gone over the edge I could testify that nobody had gone near it.

"Furthermore, Pulaski, you yourself said the car's engine was running and when you went down to the wreck, you found the transmission set in drive. The car wasn't pushed off the cliff, it was driven off. Right? And Kurtz was the only person in the vehicle."

"Yeah."

"Okay. We don't have opportunity or means. Freemont was nowhere near the death car at the time of the wreck. Nor was anyone else, as you yourself can swear to."

"How about motive?" I protested. "The victim was giving the primary suspect grief over their breakup. That's been solid for homicide plenty of times."

"It's been solid for suicide, too, *Deputy.*" The dick was pulling rank now. "We've got no evidence of anything other than a gaga offing herself over her boyfriend. Until we do, that's it!"

Punctuating his statement, the lift truck heaved the hulk of the Studebaker up and over the edge of the ravine, the wreck crumpled like an ivory and gold paper bag. A number of the responding units were checking themselves back into service and the detective team headed for their own car. "Tell you what, Pulaski," the shorter and uglier of the pair called over his shoulder, "if you're so worried about it, we'll let you handle the cleanup. Maybe you can find yourselves a clue."

I muttered a reply involving warm exhaust pipes under my breath.

Lisette dropped her cigarette butt to the ground, grinding it out under the toe of her pump. "Kevin, may I ask a dumb question?"

"Be my guest."

"Is there any chance this could have been an accident? Could her foot have slipped on the brake or something and she went over the edge without meaning to?"

I shrugged. "Anything's possible. But she wasn't all that close to the edge, she was back a good twenty feet and there's no slope to the turnout. Besides, the transmission had been shifted into drive. I checked that myself. The car went off the edge under power."

She frowned as we studied the ruined Golden Hawk. The frame was too badly wrenched for towing. They'd need a flatbed to haul it to county impound.

"It just seems funny the way this car just . . . dribbled over the edge," the Princess continued. "Say this woman had worked herself into a state of suicidal hysteria. When she made up her mind to finally kill herself, wouldn't she have, you know, floored it, launching herself into the canyon?"

"You'd think so. But suicides are essentially screwball. It's hard to say what one of them might do."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The circle of lights in the night had grown smaller. Pretty much only the hoist crew and the forensics people were left and the lab guys were packing up their gear. One of them, a balding, heavyset man in chinos and a windcheater, ambled in our direction. "The dicks left you in charge of the crime scene, deputy," he said. "You want a cast of the death car's tire tracks or should we bother?"

I stubbed a boot toe into the brick-solid hardpan. "I doubt there'll be any tracks to lift . . ." I looked around and my voice trailed off.

The unmarked homicide car had been backing out to the road, its headlights playing across the overlook. Now there hadn't been any rain in L.A. for over two weeks, just sunny, eighty-degree chamber-of-commerce weather, dig it? The ground of the turnout was baked pale dry, all except for one dark moisture stain over where the Studebaker had been parked.

I mean, it might be no big deal. There could be a hundred innocent reasons for something to have been spilled there. But it was there, right where Dorothy Kurtz's death ride had started.

"Swing one of those work lights over here."

I crossed to the patch of damp soil. It covered a couple of square feet. And there was a tire track in it, a partial at any rate. But the tread pattern was blurred in a funny way.

My first suspicion had been brake fluid, but it wasn't. It was plain old water, and evaporating rapidly in the warm night. I dabbed a fingertip into the mud and tasted. There was neither the metallic taint of rust nor the sweetness of antifreeze. It hadn't come from a radiator. Nor was the Golden Hawk air-conditioned, so it wasn't condenser drip.

I spat out the test and stood up. Okay, lay it out. The Hawk had been parked right . . . here. I could see a couple of oil drops from its engine, the lubricant dark and not yet dust-dulled. I marked off the parking spot, scraping with the heel of my boot.

I was being watched. The Princess had followed me over and the lab guys and the crane crew. The Pontiac Bonneville had sat over . . . here, close alongside, just about the swing of a car door away. It had marked its territory with a drip from its crankcase as well. I added its outline to my reconstruction, then I studied how the positions related.

Okay, that put the water stain on the right side of the Studebaker, about between the passenger door and the right rear wheel well. The tire track would have been from the right rear tire. And didn't the water stain trail off toward the edge of the overlook in a funny way?

"Photograph this," I ordered. "Closeups and areas. And make a plaster cast of the track."

I stepped back, making room for the lab men and my own thoughts. What else might still be here?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cigarette butts. The two cigarettes I'd seen Dorothy Kurtz light. There they both were, smoldered out on the gravel, Marlboro filter tips with lipstick marks.

Just the two.

I strode back to the hulk of the Golden Hawk, pausing to grab a flashlight from the tool crib of the hoist truck.

They'd pried open the driver's door of the Studebaker and now I forced it open again, leaning inside the coupe's distorted interior. Panning the light around, I found half a dozen unsmoked smokes on the floorboards and the silver cigarette case they'd spilled from. I pulled open the dashboard ashtray and found that Dorothy Kurtz was one of those people Smokey the Bear hates, a butt flipper. The ashtray hadn't been used recently.

Only two cigarettes. She might have run out of fuel for her purse lighter but the dash lighter was still in its socket. I'd been acquainted with Dorothy Kurtz long enough to know she chain-smoked under stress. And after her blowup with Freemont she'd sat in this car for a long time, but she hadn't reached for another cigarette.

What else had been funny? I sprawled across the bucket seats. *Forget that taste of paradise you'd been enjoying, Pulaski, and relive those bits and pieces of the outside world you could recall. Replay the film in slow motion.* What else had or hadn't happened?

Dome light!

When Dr. Freemont had climbed into the Golden Hawk the first time, the dome light had switched on automatically, like it was supposed to. But when he'd gotten out, it hadn't.

I rolled on my back and played the flashlight up at the ivory-colored strip of plastic inset in the roof liner. "Hey, somebody get me a pair of lab gloves and a screwdriver, a small Phillips-head!"

The others were clustering around the car now, peering through the broken windows. The balding guy in the windcheater thrust the gloves and the screwdriver in through the door.

Pulling on the thin rubber gloves, I carefully backed the tiny screws out of the light frame. It came free and I set the light cover aside.

The little light bulb was missing from its socket. Someone had wanted to do something around this car that required total darkness, something he didn't want the witnesses he knew would be there to be able to see.

There were traces of aluminum powder around the interior of the wreck.

"Who's the latent prints guy?"

My friend in the windcheater leaned in the driver's door again. "That's me."

"How did you cover the car's interior?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I dusted the door handles, steering wheel, and dashboard, the standard stuff, and I lifted two outstanding sets of fresh prints. Probably the woman's and the doctor's but we still have to match them against exemplars."

"How about the brake release and the gearshift lever?"

"All I got were smears there. Nothing clear."

"Could they have been wiped?"

He shrugged awkwardly. "Hard to say."

I pointed at the dome light assembly. "Did you dust this?"

"No. I didn't think anyone would have had a reason to touch it."

"Somebody did. Dust it now, inside the mount and out."

I squirmed out of the wreck, thinking hard. *Okay, you son of a bitch, how'd you do it and where would you do it? You'd have to work fast. You'd have only seconds and you wouldn't want attention, either then or later. Run that mental filmstrip one more time.*

I circled around to the car's passenger door. Hunkering down, I played the flashlight beam into the narrow crack between the door skin and frame.

And right there, at the bottom door angle, a little tiny bit of white fuzz. Standing, I wrenched on the door handle. It was jammed.

"Get me a wrecking bar! I gotta get this open."

I had all the help I needed. Crowbars slammed into the crack in the doorframe and strong men heaved. The door cracked and squealed wide, protesting.

A little piece of string fell out on the ground, about three inches long. One end had been knotted several times, the other was frayed from a fresh break. It went straight into an evidence envelope.

"Okay, I want light on the edge of the drop-off, aimed downslope, right where the car went over! All we got!"

Generator cables were hauled across, the work arcs were hogged into position, and everyone grabbed a big hand lantern or a five-cell, even Lisette.

It was a seventy-degree, soft-earth slope, held in place by cheat grass and spiky California holly. You could see where the Golden Hawk's wheels and belly pan had torn down through the tinder-dry ground cover and you had to thank God there hadn't been a stone to strike a spark.

Digging the heels of my boots into the crumbling soil, I followed the track of the dying Studebaker, sliding down a few feet, stopping, then playing my flashlight into the brush, looking for what had to be there to make it all work.

I spotted it about forty feet below the lip of the overview, snagged on a bush, a rag of white plastic with big blue and red polka dots. A string trailed off from one end and it was still bright and clean and slickly wet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Ned Freemont stepped out through his patio doors. Lisette flowed to one side, pressing back into the deeper black along the retaining wall, giving me working room.

"Who's there?" the intern demanded again. You could see him in the growing dawn light. He was in his shirtsleeves, his tie yanked down sloppily. He was a little unsteady, as if he'd been putting a shot glass to good use, and he looked young and scared.

"Don't tense, Doc. It's the law," I replied, staying back in the shadows beside the garage. "Deputy Pulaski, L.A. County. I was one of the guys up at the murder scene."

"Murder?" I saw him weave a little under the impact of the word.

"Uh-huh," I replied, stepping out onto the patio. "I'm just here collecting a little more evidence. Oh, and I'm collecting you, too. You're under arrest for the murder of Dorothy Kurtz."

"What . . . what are you talking about?" His voice started to lift. "Dorothy committed suicide. They said . . ."

I shook my head, taking a step closer. "Nah, you killed her. Premeditated and in the first degree, and, speaking as a cop, may I say thanks. In a world of plain old day-in day-out mayhem, this is the first time I've ever worked one of these fancy, set-up killings like Ellery Queen writes about. It's been a charge."

"You're crazy!" His voice was cracking now. "I was nowhere near Dorothy when she . . ."

"That was the whole idea, wasn't it? For you to be alibied and in the clear when her car went into the canyon?"

Before he could speak again I held out my left hand with the sheaf of bread slices in it, just starting to turn leathery. "Didn't your mama ever tell you about the starving kids in China? That was a good half a loaf thrown away in your garbage. But then, you needed the plastic bread bag to pack the ice in."

He stared at the bread in my hand as I eased in another step. "You dumped the bread out of the bag and emptied your ice trays into it. Then you tied off the end of the bag with five or six feet of string. You put it in your car and you drove up to the overview for your lovers' showdown.

"Oh, and Miss Kurtz didn't call you. You called her and asked her to meet you there. You had the terrain all scoped out. And, as you'd figured, there were other couples at the turnout, enjoying the view. It's a popular place on Saturday night. You wanted witnesses but distracted ones. People who wouldn't be paying too close attention to what you were up to.

"You pulled in alongside Dorothy Kurtz's Studebaker, got out of your car and into hers. She was pissed and you had words. Not many, because you'd already made up your mind to kill her."

"No!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh yeah," I insisted. "You're an intern at a receiving hospital. You've seen plenty of car-crash victims. You know how people die. So you reached over, grabbed her by the hair, and smashed her throat across the steering wheel, maybe a couple of times, crushing her larynx. Then you held her while she convulsed and suffocated to death."

He didn't say anything this time. It was just a sound.

"As a doc," I continued, "you'd also know how the warm night would blur the coroner's ability to estimate the exact time of death, but you still had to move fast. You also didn't want those witnesses to be able to see just exactly what you'd be doing when you got out of her car, so you disabled the dome light by removing the bulb.

"When you'd made sure of the dark, you got out of the Studebaker and chocked its rear wheel with the bag of ice from your car. You'd left it in the backseat where you could grab it easily. Then you reached back into the Studebaker, started it, released the parking brake, and put the automatic transmission in drive.

"With the engine just idling, the Stude didn't quite have enough power to ride up and over the ice chock wedged under its wheel. But man, that ice was melting. You wiped your prints off the shift lever and brake handle and you were careful to slam the string tied to the ice bag in the Studebaker's door. Then you got back in your car and you peeled out, real loud and showy, so that everyone in that turnout would remember you leaving and when."

I chuckled softly for effect. "You must have been sweating blood, praying that no peeping Tom would look into that Golden Hawk before you got yourself safely situated on that barstool. Nobody did, and after about twenty minutes, the Studebaker's idling engine pulled the car over the melting ice and rolled it off the edge of the overlook.

"As it did, the string closed in the door pulled the ice bag after the car. And, like you figured, the bag was torn away by the brush on the hillside, becoming just another piece of road trash in the sticker bushes. The couple of inches of string caught in the door would be disregarded as irrelevant and the water stain on the ground from the melting ice would evaporate."

I was within grabbing range now. "And it did, just not fast enough."

You could see the trapped animal welling up in Freemont's eyes. For all of his attempted cunning he really wasn't a very good killer. But he made the effort. "This is crazy! I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Doc," I said gently, "the coroner's checking the body for torn scalp follicles and he'll be paying real close attention to bruising and blood-pooling discrepancies. And while you wiped off the outside of the Stude's dome light, we've got a real good set of your

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prints from the inside of the housing. The backseat of your car is damp from where you laid the ice bag, and we've got a plaster cast of the blurred tire track made by the car riding up and over it. Our crime lab will be able to match the string caught in the Golden Hawk's door with that tied to the bread bag and probably to a hunk you've got laying around your house somewhere."

I gestured with the bread slices I still held. "The lab's also going to be able to match the recipe of the breadcrumbs adhering to the inside of the bread bag with what's in your garbage can. They can probably even match the baking batch and the individual loaf."

I tossed the bread down on the paving. "That's gonna be more than enough for the D.A. to bind you over. Now you can be smart or you can be stupid. Which do you want?"

"I want to talk with my family's lawyer," he said dully. He was going to be smart.

"Suit yourself." I unhooked my handcuffs from the back of my belt. "You can call him from the Hall of Justice."

There was some pink in the gray over the San Gabes and a few more birds were waking up as we led him down the road towards Car.

We'd take him in so the detectives could catch the credit and the paperwork. Then the Princess and I would drive out to her place or mine. We'd grab a shower, a little sleep, and maybe get back to what we'd started up on the hills.

I guided Freemont with a hand on his shoulder while the Princess trotted along beside us. "Why kill her?" she asked conversationally. "You had it all, the money, the medical degree, the future. Why mess it up?"

Sometimes if you hit 'em just when they're in shock from the arrest, when they're in that strange moment of emotional relief because their guilt's out, sometimes they'll pop open.

"Dorothy wanted to get married," he murmured, sounding very young and very lost. "And I wasn't ready. She said she'd gotten pregnant. She'd make it ugly with my family, a breach of promise . . . She'd ruin my chances with the practice that was taking me on . . . It just seemed easier for her not to be there anymore."

"Not really, man," I replied. "Not really." ●

ATTENTION READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address so that we can contact them, too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SKIN DEEP

by Renée Yim

Translated from the French by Mary Kennedy

The following tale belongs to our Department of First Stories as the pseudonymous 29-year-old writer's first work of fiction ever to see print in any language. But it also belongs to Passport to Crime, for the author was born in Lyon, France, of parents from Cameroon, West Africa. She worked as a podiatrist, using her free time to translate articles from English to French, before taking courses at a Parisian writing school and trying fiction. ■

Friday, September 21, 10:00 A.M.

Antoine was sitting in the back office reading the fax from his accountant. He sighed and removed his glasses. Things looked serious. He rubbed his eyes, then held them closed for a minute, half hoping it was just a bad dream that would go away when he opened them again. But it was no use. There it was: "*. . . declare bankruptcy . . .*"

His little company was struggling. That he could live with. But to see it disappear altogether was like walking with a bad limp for seven years, then waking in bed one morning to find both legs amputated.

Back in June 1998, his best friend and associate, Mathieu, had found a space in this small renovated building. In a flood of energy, the two of them had fixed it up. They had faith in their project: literary publishers and booksellers. Antoine Dufour and Mathieu Planchon were striking out on a great adventure. Six months later, the Dufour-Planchon Bookshop opened its doors in Paris.

The firm, clear sound of the shop door opening brought Antoine back to the present. He and Mathieu were having a book signing for the release of Yasmine Azoul and Hinda Wafi's book *Skin Deep,* about two Muslim women and their differing lifestyles. He raised the blind and glanced quickly into the shop. A tall young man wearing a cap was stepping through the door. Yasmine was sitting

©2007 by Renée Yim; translation ©2007 by Mary Kennedy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

behind a wooden table listening to a customer. Was it small talk, flattery, or curiosity? Mathieu was meticulously arranging the display of new releases in the shop window. Antoine picked up the stack of letters that needed to be mailed before noon and emerged from the back office, doing his best to hide his distress.

As he gave Mathieu the bad news, Antoine noticed the face of the young man with the cap twist into a grimace. He watched the beanpole of a man move, book in hand, toward Yasmine. At his approach, the cheerful expression on Yasmine's face faded. When she reached for the book he held out, thinking he wanted her autograph, he spat on it, flung it in her face, and cried out, "Miscreant!" Spouting insults, he turned on his heels and, proud of his performance, left the shop.

Antoine and Mathieu rushed over to Yasmine with surprising speed. The same anxious cry sprang from both their throats at once. "Are you okay?"

". . . Yes," she murmured.

Yasmine felt her throat tighten. Her eyes, almost wild, followed Mathieu's hand as it picked up the object of aggression. Such violence over a book! "That's no reason to assault someone," she continued in bewilderment.

11:30 A.M.

That jerk had certainly succeeded in upsetting Yasmine, but she'd shown herself to be brave, thought Antoine, as he slipped some coins into a stamp dispenser at the post office. He was checking to make sure he had all the letters that had to be mailed when, suddenly, a deafening blast resonated throughout the building. Three hundred meters away, the shop window of Dufour-Planchon had been blown to pieces. Someone had thrown a bomb.

Tuesday, September 25

Yasmine gripped the bed frame, then let herself fall back onto the pillows. The clock on the wall of her hospital room read 4:00 P.M. Antoine would be there soon. She picked up a literary magazine she knew she couldn't possibly read. A persistent migraine hammered in her head.

On the other side of town, Antoine was seated on the cushions of his living-room couch preparing himself psychologically to announce his decision. From time to time he cast furtive glances at Gabrielle. She was unusually calm today. He noticed that she had hurt her right hand. How could he not notice such an elaborate bandage? It was clear to Antoine that Gabrielle was trying to attract his attention. Either that or she had injured herself again as a result of her alcohol-soaked brain.

Their eyes met. Mustering his courage, Antoine broke the silence. "I'm asking for a divorce." His face had become serious.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who is it?" she began. "Yasmine?"

"Stop it, Gabrielle. I'm tired of telling you, my relations with Yasmine are strictly professional."

"Liar, liar, liar! You're nothing but a liar."

"That's enough, Gabrielle!" The anger in Antoine's voice was rising.

"I'm no idiot. I've seen how you undress her with your eyes. You couldn't care less about her book," she retorted.

Antoine stood up. "Think whatever you like. I have no intention of trying to convince you."

"Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!" she screamed in fury.

"I'm suffocating, Gabrielle. You're suffocating me. Our marriage is suffocating me. I feel trapped. . . . I want a divorce!"

"I'll keep you away from Maeva. She'll come with me. You can forget her. . . . Just remember, a father who's always broke never gets custody of his child."

Antoine was about to fire back, "Because a mother who's an alcoholic is better!" when he noticed Maeva. He passed his tongue over his dry lips and remained silent.

Now totally enraged, Gabrielle wiped away the tears that were welling in her eyes with a furious gesture and turned toward the side table, her attention irresistibly drawn by a vase. She grabbed it. Antoine was holding the doorknob. The vase flew through the air as he slammed the door shut behind him.

From the corner where she had hidden, Maeva could see that her mother was beside herself.

Riding down in the elevator, Antoine mulled over Gabrielle's threats. She had crossed a new line by bringing Maeva into their problems. If she thought she was going to use their little girl to hold on to him, she had another thing coming. He couldn't stand living with her anymore. Gabrielle was jealous by nature. They'd met at university, and even back then she used to repeat, "I trust you, but, as a rule, I don't trust women. They find you far too attractive." Her remarks became more unpleasant after Maeva's birth. Her trim body, which had thickened during pregnancy, refused to slim down. Unable to come to terms with her new appearance, she'd slipped into a state of chronic paranoia. He couldn't speak to anyone of the opposite sex, let alone look at them, without being accused of lustful intentions. When she had had too much to drink, a scathing tone crept into her remarks: "Dirty hypocrite, if you chose your authors for the quality of their work, you wouldn't be broke all the time."

But what could she know about literature? She was the director of a laboratory.

It was 5:30 P.M. by the time Antoine got to the hospital. He followed the nurse's directions and went down the corridor to room 212, carrying a potted amaryllis.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A plant to brighten the place up a bit!" he announced pleasantly, before greeting Yasmine's mother, Madame Azoul, then Mathieu and Hinda.

Yasmine answered gently, "How lovely, the scent of fresh flowers . . ." She slipped her arms around Antoine's neck and pulled him against her.

Antoine took off his glasses and started chewing absent-mindedly on the plastic arm of the frame, as he always did when facing a problem. "I've brought two pieces of news. One good. And one bad. Which do you want to hear first, Yasmine?"

"Keep the good news for last and start with the bad."

Antoine handed her a brown paper envelope. "We received this letter yesterday. It was postmarked in Paris," he explained reluctantly.

Madame Azoul's eyes darkened, searching her daughter's tense face as Yasmine read the letter.

"A bunch of insults and threats," Yasmine summed up, a note of anxiety in her voice.

"Threats?!" repeated Madame Azoul, clearly alarmed by the news.

Antoine quickly interrupted Yasmine and her mother. "Wait, wait, wait, wait. This is no time to waste energy on fear and speculation. Let's not forget that the police are investigating. Two witnesses noticed a suspicious-looking guy smoking a cigarette near the bookshop just before the explosion. Their description of him matches the thug who harassed Yasmine on Friday. Tall, thin, a cap on his head, probably of Middle Eastern origin. The Criminal Records Office collected some cigarette stubs from the sidewalk to take fingerprints. I'm sure they'll find the guilty party. If things take a bad turn, Yasmine will receive all the protection she needs."

"What's the good news?" ventured Madame Azoul, still worried. She was looking straight at Antoine.

"Next week we've been asked for . . . a radio interview!" Antoine announced. "Go on, see if you can guess which program?"

Yasmine raised her eyebrows, indicating her impatience.

He cleared his throat and articulated grandly, *"Both Sides!"*

The expression on Yasmine's face brightened only slightly, but her eyes were sparkling with excitement when she exclaimed, "To what do we owe this honor?"

With a look of triumph, Mathieu unfolded his newspaper and read out loud the headline across the top of the page:

YOUNG ALGERIAN WRITER VICTIM OF
BOMB ATTACK IN PARIS BOOKSHOP.

For a split second, a shadow veiled Yasmine's eyes. Hinda interrupted Mathieu. "Are you all right, Yasmine?"

"I've had a close brush with the worst that can happen . . . I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

admit I'm afraid. If I simply ignore this piece of hate mail, I don't dare imagine what may be in store for me."

"You know, even if I haven't done as much as you to promote our book—and I'll never be able to thank you enough for respecting my choice not to—I understand your fear, Yasmine," Hinda said. "And I share it with you. All the same, I do think this invitation to go on the air is a great opportunity."

Antoine nodded in agreement as he rolled up his shirt sleeves. "Hinda is right. Promoting a book involves knowing how to take advantage of unforeseen events to push it into the spotlight."

Madame Azoul turned toward Antoine and said courteously, but in her sternest voice, "In such a delicate climate, why throw oil on the fire? Is this radio program really essential?" An anxious note had crept into her final words. Antoine pulled up his chair and took Madame Azoul's hands in his as he tried to give her a reassuring account of the situation.

Hinda also slipped in a word. "Madame Azoul, with all due respect, I believe the best way to promote tolerance is by practicing what you preach."

"And that's not all," Mathieu pursued, clicking his tongue. "Our position as an independent publisher is precarious. These days, a book's fate depends a lot on the media. We've seen a decline in sales of all our literary works recently. If this trend were to continue . . ." Mathieu left his sentence hanging.

Thursday, October 4

Gabrielle was putting away groceries in the kitchen cupboards. She had left her husband, taking Maeva with her, and had settled in her parents' place while they were away on holiday. She had decided to erect a wall between Maeva and her father. Gabrielle glanced at her watch: 11:45 A.M. This was Antoine and Yasmine's big day. "Let them make the most of it. It won't last," she muttered as she switched on the radio. She turned the dial and tuned in to the station broadcasting *Both Sides*.

11:50 A.M.

Antoine and Yasmine got out of a taxi and entered the studio building. The security guards had them go through a metal detector before directing them to the elevator.

Yasmine took a deep breath and, clenching her fists, looked up at Antoine. "Why should I be afraid? I won't give them that satisfaction."

Antoine smiled approvingly. He had not yet told Yasmine about the results of the cigarette-stub analysis: None of the fingerprints had showed up in the national database. The police had nothing solid to go on.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow as she heard the program begin. "With us today are Yasmine Azoul and Antoine Dufour. Yasmine Azoul is the author of the novel *Skin Deep,* published by Dufour-Planchon."

The audience welcomed the guests with applause.

Solange Dumas's familiar voice continued vivaciously. "Two Muslim women, one veiled, the other not, exchange lives for a day. The reader follows the adventures and the reflections of the two protagonists. The novel is largely inspired by a real-life experiment conducted by Yasmine Azoul and her co-author Hinda Wafi, who has chosen not to join us today. Let's start with you, Yasmine. How did this idea first come to you?"

"In a writer's workshop!" Yasmine answered. "I'd seen Hinda there regularly and took to her very quickly. We shared the same religious beliefs, but our views were different when it came to wearing the veil. Suddenly it occurred to us, why not try switching skins for a day?"

"You were born in Algeria and Hinda in France?"

"That's right. She wears the veil and I don't. My real reason for coming to France was to experience equality of the sexes. At the university in Algiers, girls have to fight to exist without the Islamic veil. Before meeting Hinda, I used to berate Muslim women who wanted to wear the veil when they'd grown up in France. I thought it was just a fad."

"And today?"

"Writing this novel, I learned that whether you're veiled or not, it's no use feeling victimized by your own history. Or guilty about it. Wearing the veil is natural for Hinda. And she doesn't see herself as a scapegoat for her religion. The role of a writer is to be an impartial witness. I think there's great value in finding words to explain the way other people feel. Hinda and I have refused to confine ourselves to a simple definition of a complex reality. In our book, the two women attempt to break down any preconceived ideas the other may have had."

The presenter turned to Antoine. "Antoine Dufour, you have exposed yourself to the wrath of extremists. Does the publication of this novel have anything to do with activist literature?"

"The idea never crossed my mind until I was threatened. Let's just say the book's publication has bothered a few narrow-minded cranks. I would never have become a publisher, you know, if I hadn't read Sartre. The most important word in existentialism is probably the word 'choice.' For me, the publication of certain books constitutes a personal commitment to the search for truth. I made the decision to publish *Skin Deep;* now I must bear the consequences. Yasmine and Hinda have truly captured their times in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this novel. I was taken in right from the very first page of the manuscript."

Questions shot from Solange Dumas's mouth in rapid fire. "Audacity? Or just a commercial ploy? In a recent article Clémence Boulouque wrote: 'So many things are being published on Islam, good and bad. Are publishers putting a match to the fuse?'"

Solange Dumas asked these questions point blank and Antoine responded in a voice taut as a bowstring. "Let's not get everything mixed up."

Then his voice softened. "Why publish this book now? Because in France, by tradition people mostly only talk about literature in the fall. And believe me, this is something I deplore! Literature is the great encyclopedia of social reality. It expresses the nature and fabric of a society. This is especially true of the novel, where we're free to escape from our taboos. Literature has an essential role to play. It helps us anticipate the stream of continual change that is life."

The audience applauded vigorously.

"It gives independent voices a chance to express themselves, so they can help resolve pernicious misunderstandings," Yasmine added.

Antoine went on, "And that's why, in spite of the pitfalls, literary publishing is indestructible. Utopian? Passionate? I'm a bit of both, I guess!"

Solange Dumas turned back to Yasmine. "What do you remember most about your day in the skin of a veiled woman?"

"The heat. It's hot under that veil. And the people staring at me."

"And Hinda's day without a veil?"

"She felt it was like . . ." Yasmine had trouble finding the words. " . . . taking off her clothes. The Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif, who doesn't wear a veil, has quite rightly written: 'The veil, like Islam itself, is at the same time sensual and puritan, it is contradictory and formidable.' Hinda and I both aspire to a peaceful form of Islam. Hinda hides her hair under a piece of cloth and me, I keep my head bare, but this doesn't prevent us from exchanging our ideas, our reflections. Writing this novel with Hinda did me a lot of good!"

"Do you think this book might help cool debate around the veil?"

"I hope it will help focus some other people's minds on public-spiritedness and modernity," Antoine offered. "In closing, I'd like to quote Aragon, if I may: 'Literature is the art of saying things that are forbidden using words that are not.'"

Solange Dumas thanked Antoine and Yasmine and then repeated one last time for the listeners, "*Skin Deep,* published by Dufour-Planchon."

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

12:30 P.M.

As Dumas uttered her final words, Gabrielle flicked off the radio. She felt overwhelmed by the anger that now colored her face. She had been gone for three days. Antoine must certainly have moved in with Yasmine by now (or the other way around). *To protect her!* She decided. she had to know. In her agitation, she opened the refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of beer, and poured herself a generous glassful.

"Mommy!" Maeva's young voice made Gabrielle jump, beer spilling onto her bandage from the glass she held in her trembling hands.

"Yes, darling?"

Maeva was coming down the stairs. "I'm hungry. What's for lunch?"

"Macaroni and cheese?"

Gabrielle unwrapped the bandage on her right hand, revealing an ugly burn—still painful—as Maeva appeared in the doorway.

"My tummy approves of the menu. On one condition!"

Maeva gave a mischievous little smile to which Gabrielle responded, "More cheese than macaroni! And what about you setting the table?"

"Right away." Maeva hesitated an instant, then said, "Mommy, you said we were just at Grandma and Grandpa's to look after their house while they're away. But I can tell things are different between you and Daddy. I miss him."

Gabrielle did not answer.

1:00 P.M.

Antoine and Yasmine left the studio feeling quite satisfied with their performance.

"We did a pretty good job defending our book, didn't we? What do you think, Yasmine?"

"You were right. Never let fear determine your actions."

"You learn fast. You also look dead tired."

"I am! I think I need a nap," Yasmine admitted as she hailed a taxi.

"Shall I see you home?"

"No, thanks. Don't worry, my mother's moved in for a few days."

Before closing the taxi door behind her, Antoine bent down and said, "I'll give you a call tonight."

7:00 P.M.

Savoring a cup of jasmine tea with shortbread, Yasmine's mother sat absorbed in the paper: "*Skin Deep.* Indignant reactions from some quarters. Publisher threatened. An author's life endangered."

The telephone rang and she picked up the cordless. "Hello?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was Antoine Dufour. "How is our heroine of the day faring?"

"Better. She had a long rest and resurfaced about an hour ago. I . . ."

A noise that sounded like a muffled, strangled cry diverted Madame Azoul's attention. Was it coming from the garage?

"Madame Azoul?! What's happening?" The concern in Antoine's voice was very real.

Madame Azoul moved the phone away from her ear and called Yasmine several times. There was no answer. The silence was not normal. She pulled herself together and headed down the hallway, a lump in her throat. "I don't know, Monsieur Dufour . . . I . . . I'm going to look for Yasmine."

Her daughter's room was empty. Madame Azoul advanced cautiously toward the railing of the stairway leading to the garage. As she opened the door on the landing, she was surprised by the cool draft that raised the hair on her forearms. Then she caught sight of the words painted on the hood of Yasmine's tiny Renault Twingo and stared in horror: BETRAYAL = PUNISHMENT.

"Yasmine? Yasmine?!" Madame Azoul's voice rose several octaves.

"Monsieur Dufour . . . Come quickly! Come quickly! Someone's broken into my daughter's place!" she wailed into the receiver.

In the trunk of a car speeding down the highway, Yasmine lay jammed against the spare tire struggling for breath.

10:30 P.M.

"We're going to make announcements on all the television and radio stations. And some backup units are being dispatched to help out with the search." Alexandre Suzuki, Criminal Investigation Officer, was making every effort to sound solicitous, but confronted with the anxiety in Madame Azoul's eyes and the deathly pallor of her face, it wasn't easy to be reassuring.

Antoine was sitting at the dining-room table, lost in thoughts of his own. Studying him out of the corner of his eye, Suzuki promised himself that he'd have a chat with him later. Suddenly, the telephone rang, making them all jump. Madame Azoul rushed for the receiver, then struggled to regain her composure, taking a deep breath before picking it up.

"The exchange will take place tomorrow at eleven P.M. The ransom is twenty thousand euros. In fifty-euro bills. You'll receive further instructions one hour before delivery."

The voice was harsh and sounded disguised. The most accurate description Madame Azoul could come up with was to say that it sounded fake.

"Impossible to locate the call," interjected a police officer.

"Twenty-four hours, only twenty-four hours!" Suzuki cursed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They had just hung up the phone when it rang again. Antoine leaped from his chair and snatched up the receiver. "Hello? Hello?"

"It's me, Hinda. . . . They're asking for a ransom? Oh my God, that's awful!" She was clearly very agitated.

An instant later, Mathieu knocked at the door, panting for breath. "When did Yasmine disappear?"

Madame Azoul explained the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping before leaving the room, her footsteps heavy with fatigue.

"Monsieur Dufour," said Officer Suzuki cautiously, "we have examined the threat letter and found no conclusive evidence. No fingerprints. The culprit hasn't left a trace."

"Quelle merde!" Antoine exclaimed.

Suzuki went on calmly. "We've brought in the extremists we know to be connected to Islamic groups for questioning. They've made no secret of their religious fanaticism, but we failed to find anything incriminating when we searched their premises. We've turned up nothing to confirm our fears."

With a perplexed look on his face, Suzuki mused, "Why ask for only twenty thousand euros? And no allusion to the promotion of the book. Strange."

"But that's made very clear in the threat letter."

"Precisely! That's what intrigues me. This time round, he's stated no conditions in that regard. Unless . . ."

"Unless?"

"He has no intention of letting her go. We have twenty-four hours to solve all this."

"Why *he?"* Antoine's voice trembled just the right amount.

"There must be a connection between the thug who assaulted Yasmine in your bookshop, the explosion, and the kidnapper. Given the urgency of the situation, you should contact your distributors immediately and tell them to stop everything for the moment. Nevertheless, you're quite right. We must remain open to any possibility."

Taken aback, Antoine exclaimed, "Give in to threats?"

"Let's just say we need to calm things down a bit. In your eyes, who, other than a lunatic, might hate Yasmine so much that they'd . . ."

"As far as I know, she doesn't have any enemies."

"A witness noticed a metallic-grey Renault Clio hatchback parked in front of Yasmine's home toward the end of the afternoon. They couldn't make out who the driver was, but he or she was obviously watching the place."

"A Clio, you say!"

"That's right, a Clio." Suzuki was all ears.

"My wife Gabrielle drives a grey Clio. She thinks I'm having an affair with Yasmine. I've asked for a divorce. Her pathological jeal-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ousy is poisoning my life. She's staying at her parents' place at the moment with our daughter. In a sudden fit of madness she might conceivably have come by here, looking for some sort of evidence to support her phony accusations. Gabrielle is definitely unpredictable, but she's not a criminal."

"Unpredictable?"

"She drinks too much."

"What does your wife do for a living?"

"She's the director of a chemical laboratory."

"Perfect profile for putting together a homemade bomb like the one that wrecked your bookshop."

"Hold it right there. You're going too far. And you've got things wrong. She was at work that day. I'm not trying to find alibis for her, but it would be hard to imagine Gabrielle's trembling fingers assembling a bomb. Since she hit the bottle she's been plagued by clumsiness, even at work. In fact, just recently she burned herself preparing a solution without her gloves on. She was handling acid like a beginner."

"Like a beginner?"

"Yes. You hardly need to be an expert to know that you add acid to water and not the other way around. That's high-school stuff."

"I don't remember what I learned in chemistry at high school!"

"I'm married to a specialist on the subject."

"Exactly! Now, there's a lead worth exploring." Despite Antoine's display of scepticism, Suzuki's voice was charged with innuendo.

"Il n'y a pas de fumée sans feu, Monsieur Dufour."

"If you're trying to be funny, think again."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Fumée, feu, Dufour."

"You strike me as very defensive about the matter. . . . How would you describe your relationship with Yasmine Azoul?".

"I'm just her publisher and a friend. Gabrielle imagines the most dramatic betrayal scenarios every time a woman gets anywhere near me."

Friday, October 5, 9:00 A.M.

Antoine informed all the relevant people in the book industry about the measures that had to be taken given the seriousness of the situation. As he hung up the phone, he glanced at his desk diary. Ten thousand copies sold in two weeks! With a look of near triumph on his face, Antoine crushed the fax his accountant had sent on September 21 with the words ". . . *declare bankruptcy* . . ." The media were giving the shocking event wide coverage. *Skin Deep* was selling like hotcakes.

Mathieu popped into the back office. "Gabrielle doesn't suspect a thing, Antoine!"

"That's the whole idea!" responded Antoine, slipping on his coat.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mathieu stepped to one side to let him by. "Where are you going?"

"I've got an appointment with the accountant, and later this morning I'm seeing my lawyer, Maître Legrand. I won't let that bitch take my daughter away from me!"

The accountant shook Antoine's hand warmly and offered him a seat.

"Your increase in profits couldn't have come at a better time, Monsieur Dufour."

"I really thought it was game over."

"So did I. But fortune has smiled on you."

Antoine sighed heavily. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"Please excuse my lack of tact. I've been following the whole business in the press. This story is really taking on unbelievable proportions."

Sensing that the conversation was moving toward an embarrassing subject, the accountant handed Antoine the latest inventory and offered him a quick overview of the new state of his finances. The situation was so encouraging that when he left the accountant's office—despite the gravity of the circumstances—Antoine could no longer contain his joy and executed a little dance in the corridor. As he did so, he felt his cell phone vibrate.

"Maeva, my little sweetheart."

"How are you, Daddy?"

"Almost better now that I hear your voice. Everything all right with Mommy?"

"Yes. But I've got a feeling we're going to stay at Grandma and Grandpa's forever!"

"That's just a feeling, sweetheart. Everything will soon be back to normal."

"Have you made up with Mommy?"

Antoine evaded the question and said he was sorry to have to cut the call short. He promised his daughter that he would see her again soon.

9:50 P.M.

The kidnapper was going to call in approximately ten minutes to give his instructions. Antoine emerged from Yasmine's bathroom, where he'd been splashing cold water on his face in an attempt to wash away the stress he was feeling, and joined the others in the living room/library. Officer Suzuki was pacing to and fro between the window and the desk where the telephone sat in its place of honor. The two police officers positioned on either side of Madame Azoul were trying to reassure her. The poor woman was distraught. Hinda sat silent and nervous, holding her head between her hands and massaging her temples impatiently.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At 10:00 P.M. precisely, the phone rang and they all listened carefully to the voice on the other end. "Madame Azoul, you will place the money in the public garbage bin located behind the bookshop, next to the bus shelter. This will be your punishment for having raised a miscreant. If you call the police, you'll be digging Yasmine Azoul's grave."

"Don't hurt my daughter!" implored Madame Azoul, a tremor in her voice.

"It all depends on you. Do as you're told and she will live."

"I want to speak to Yasmine!" she rushed to add.

"You don't get it, do you? My orders are all that count. Just get the dough together."

"But—" There was no one there.

A glimmer of light appeared in Suzuki's eyes. "We've located the call: Senlis!"

"Senlis!" repeated Antoine with surprise. He swallowed hard to prevent himself from saying more.

A flash of hope lit up Madame Azoul's face.

A squad of policemen escorted Yasmine's mother to the Dufour-Planchon bookshop while Suzuki and Antoine, followed by three police cars, raced towards Senlis.

Antoine eyed the GPS nervously. "If that lunatic has touched a single hair on Yasmine's head . . ."

"Take it easy. We're only five hundred meters away."

Suzuki slowed down, pulled over, and parked.

"A telephone booth! *Merde! Merde! Merde!*" he exclaimed seconds later, kicking the curb. He called the squad and ordered them to follow the kidnapper's exact instructions. "Don't intervene before the exchange."

Antoine got out of the car. "I told you that Gabrielle is living at her parents' at the moment. . . . They live in Senlis."

"Why didn't you say so before? What's the address?"

"Twelve bis, rue Meaux. I'll show you the way."

The shutters of the house were closed. Suzuki walked up the driveway, approaching under the cover of three hidden policemen, and hammered on the door. "Madame Dufour! Police! . . . Open up! Madame Dufour!" He pounded harder.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming." Gabrielle opened the door. Suzuki showed her his badge.

"What's going on?" Her eyes nearly popped out of her head when she caught sight of Yasmine staggering across the garden on the arm of a police officer.

"She was in the shed at the back of the garden," he shouted.

Gabrielle rubbed her eyes. "But . . . what's she doing here? At my parents' place?"

"That's what you're going to tell us back at the police station,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Suzuki replied coldly. There was something in Gabrielle's attitude that struck him as aggressive. She looked heavy, but strong, too.

"At the police station? . . . You must be mistaken," she stammered in a panicky voice.

Suzuki handcuffed her and contacted the other squad. "Yasmine is safe and sound. It was just a diversionary tactic or a test of some sort. Who knows? You can bring back the ransom."

Antoine was upstairs folding Maeva's belongings into a suitcase. His little girl would spend the rest of the night back in her own bed. At home.

Monday, October 8

The associates Dufour and Planchon, Yasmine, her mother, and Hinda, co-author of the book that was all the buzz, listened to the anchorwoman on the midday news praising the police for their professionalism as she described the kidnapping. "Drama and literature. When jealousy intrudes upon publishing . . . "

Yasmine was still very shaken. She had been sedated with sleeping pills and her mind was muddled and confused. She'd been unable to identify Gabrielle with any certainty as her aggressor.

A few months later . . .

Ensconced in an armchair, Mathieu was browsing through the book reviews in *Livres Hebdo*. He had just lit his pipe, and the pleasant smell of his tobacco wafted through the room. The victorious grin he wore on his face reminded Antoine of that eventful day that had marked the beginning of their glory. Antoine let his thoughts drift. The Paul Morand Literary Prize had been awarded to the authors of *Skin Deep*. "A work outstanding for the quality of its thinking, its spirit of independence, and, of course, its style."

Antoine glanced out the window. Under the awning stood Gabrielle, wiping her feet on the doormat.

"Maeva! Your mommy's here!"

"Okay, I'm ready."

Antoine and Gabrielle exchanged a few civilities. She was still full of resentment toward Antoine. The divorce proceedings were underway and he had custody of Maeva. Despite certain unresolved inconsistencies, Gabrielle remained the principal suspect in the Azoul affair. Her lawyer had succeeded in getting her free on bail until the trial took place and she was only authorized to see Maeva every second Saturday, and no later than 5:00 P.M.

"Okay, Mommy, let's go!"

Gabrielle's eyes misted over with tears at the sight of her daughter. Antoine placed a kiss on Maeva's turned-up nose and smiled thinly at Gabrielle, but in his gut he was saying, "She's my daughter. Nobody will ever take her away from me. Not even you. I hope you've got that clear."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

A quarter of an hour later, Farouk stepped into the house, looking his usual self with his hands stuffed into his pockets and a navy-blue cap on his head. Always on the lookout for a good scam, he wore a broad smile on his face. He was coming to receive his due: a handsome sum of money. Thanks to him, the company Dufour-Planchon was flourishing. A bottle filled with explosives was all it had taken to trigger a media hype around the novel of Yasmine Azoul and Hinda Wafi.

"Now, that's how you make a bestseller!" boasted Antoine as he greeted Farouk.

Mathieu teased his associate as he poured the drinks. "'Honors dishonor, decorations degrade, and duties demean!'"

"Monsieur's quoting Flaubert! What's to be done if literary publishing can't be measured by the number of books sold?" There was a hint of humor in Antoine's voice.

"Create a drama!" Mathieu pointed to the sky with his index finger, aping a visionary.

Antoine and Farouk roared with laughter.

"And what a drama!" Farouk exclaimed. "Madame Dufour's jealousy and Yasmine Azoul's naiveté really served your cause well. I must say, Mathieu is a good actor. How many detective films have you two guys seen? Mathieu had his role of kidnapper down pat. And that threatening letter was the work of a real pro!"

"They saw the smoke but not the fire. You know, I was mailing that letter at the very moment you were blowing up the bookshop window," Antoine remarked.

Mathieu held out a Kir Royale to Farouk. "That literary award was the icing on the cake!"

"It certainly was," Antoine agreed, raising his glass to drink to their success. They all clinked glasses.

That evening, Antoine and Mathieu would be throwing one of those dinners that play such a fundamental role in maintaining good relations with key public figures, journalists, and influential members of organizations that award literary prizes.

Suzuki could count any number of affairs in which the husband, neighbor, or associate was guilty, but where evidence was lacking. This particularly tangled case was obsessing him. There were too many things that Gabrielle Dufour didn't know. Was it all a huge sham? Maybe not. He had to explore other avenues.

"A literary prize guarantees the survival of a publishing house," he pointed out to his colleague as he backed into a parallel parking space.

In the rearview mirror, he noticed a tall fellow with a cap on his head leaving Antoine Dufour's place. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ms. Mitty

by Brenda Joziatis

Ms. Mitty, also known as Margaret Wentworth, knows she is made for better things. During the day, she wears brown cardigans, slightly pilled, and high granny shoes, tightly laced. The latter support her weak ankles. But in free moments, when she lets her mind wander to what should be reality, it is a different story.

She has just performed a triple jump that brings the Olympic crowd to its feet. Ending in an arabesque that threatens to split her skimpy cerise costume, she bows her head modestly, accepting the plaudits of the audience. MargaretMargaretMargaret, they chant. The judges hold up their cards: all tens. She skates around the arena, waving and blowing kisses. Later, the gold medal bouncing between her perky breasts . . .

The character Walter Mitty, from the Thurber story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and later the movie of that title starring Danny Kaye, is one of those fictional creations that have a life beyond the work in which they were born. Says author Brenda Joziatis, "I always thought there should be a female version [of Walter Mitty]. . . . We all have dreams. The only reason I didn't give Ms. Mitty the Pulitzer was because I was reserving that particular fantasy for myself."

The children have finished with the Pledge of Allegiance. Ms. Mitty sighs and removes her hand from her ample chest. It's March. She supposes she can have them cut shamrocks this week. But when she suggests it, their reaction is lukewarm. "Do we hafta?" whines the little Saunderson girl.

"Yes," says Ms. Mitty. "Spring is coming. In Ireland, it's already green."

Basil Bates looks at her sceptically. "How do you know?"

"Well," says Ms. Mitty, "I just know. They get spring sooner in Ireland."

She was reluctant to go—What about Jackie?—but Jack had insisted. I want to show you my father's land, the thatched cottages, the stone ruins, the Dublin pubs. So she smiled, that wistful little smile that he loved, and packed her bags. They took Air Force Six,

©2007 by Brenda Joziatis

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the plane he kept for just such assignations. (The bigots called it Air Force Sex, but she ignored them.) Jack quoted Yeats to her over the ocean and they landed in a world of emerald green. Oh, how she sorrowed later in the administration when news of Dallas came crackling over the radio . . .

"Did you watch the Academy Awards?" The question comes from Serena but is really addressed to her classmates, not her teacher. The room instantly fills with whistles and catcalls.

"Whoo-ee! Some babes!" "Did you see Sharon Stone? I thought her boobs were gonna fall out of her dress!"

Ms. Mitty tries to run a tight ship but is increasingly unsuccessful. She shushes the rowdy ones, turns to Serena, and answers with dignity: "No, dear, I didn't happen to watch them. Not this year."

Everyone had told her this was her year. And they were right. She makes her way up the aisle, her mouth a moue of humble disbelief. Her gown is a simple black sheath, slit so her gorgeous legs show as she climbs to the stage. An Oscar de la Renta, of course. Elegant, chic, its very name a portent of what the evening holds. Best Actress. Her peers give her a standing ovation. Tears glisten in her eyes. She blinks them back. I want to thank the little people, she says. Without you, all of you, I couldn't have done it. This (she waves the golden Oscar high in the air) belongs to all of us . . .

"Look, Miss Wentworth. I made enough for all of us." Basil Bates is tugging at her sweater, flourishing a sheaf of shamrocks. Ms. Mitty, still trying to decide if maybe a fiery political diatribe might be more appropriate for the Academy Awards, has trouble focusing.

"Where did you get those, Basil?" She is sure that last year's fourth-graders had taken their shamrocks home.

"From the computer," Basil says. "I just did a Web search for shamrocks and printed these for coloring. We can make them orange or pink or purple even."

This is too much! Basil is an arrogant little creature, she decides. If there's one thing she hates worse than computers, it's children who are proficient at using them. Ms. Mitty tries, but the thing always seizes up on her, leaves boxes with indecipherable messages, reduces her to a frazzle that borders on tears.

"Shamrocks are always green," she informs Basil. Then: "Computers will destroy your creativity. We don't need computers in Miss Wentworth's classroom." She hands out scissors, green construction paper, dittoed shamrock patterns. "*This* is how we do it in Miss Wentworth's classroom."

What type of computer do you use? asks the book reviewer for the New York Times. *I don't, she says sweetly. I compose my poems by hand, letter by exquisite letter, with a Parker fountain pen given me by my late father. The paper, of course, is handmade rag fashioned by my administrative assistant, the ink hand-ground and imported*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from Thailand . . .

"Can you tie my shoe?" It's the Saunderson girl again, snotty-nosed and laces dragging. Really, these children have no idea how they interrupt the genius of Ms. Mitty's inner life!

"Liane," Ms. Mitty commands, with real vigor in her voice, "by now you should have learned to tie your own laces. Please do so."

Liane sighs, props one foot on the wastebasket, and promptly overturns it. She starts to whimper.

"Don't whine!" Ms. Mitty is sharp with whiners. "And tie those laces before you trip." Liane shuffles off, snuffling. The errant laces trail beside her feet like trolling fishing lines.

There, thinks Ms. Mitty with satisfaction, that's how you deal with malcontents. With firmness. Firmness is the mark of a leader. She makes Basil stand the basket upright and put the scattered papers—including the illicit computer shamrocks—back in.

Jack had always admired her decisiveness. You're soft on the outside, Margaret, but your inner core is granite, rock-solid. You're a natural-born leader. They were lying aboard a Greek fishing vessel in the Mediterranean, and he was rubbing suntan oil on her voluptuous back. After my second term, I'll devote my energies to your career. Governor, U.S. Senator . . . who knows how far you could climb. We'll have to position you so that when opportunity knocks . . .

President Mitty hears the rapping but chooses to ignore it. How dare they interrupt her in the Oval Office! The noise persists. There is a babble of small voices. "The door. Someone's at the door." Then, "Miss Wentworth, Miss Wentworth."

Ms. Mitty surfaces, realizes the rapping is not opportunity, rather it comes from Amy Peterson, her colleague across the hall. Amy has agreed to knock each day to remind her of lunch. Now she hovers solicitously by Ms. Mitty's desk while the children jostle and shove themselves into ragged lines.

"Are you okay, Margaret? You looked kind of out of it there for a while."

"I'm fine," Ms. Mitty snaps. "The children were just extremely trying this morning." To prove her point, Basil Bates is writing a computer address on the side chalkboard. Probably the one for shamrocks. "Young man, erase that. Right this minute." Amy could use an example of decisiveness. Often, Ms. Mitty hears the children in the adjacent classroom. They are usually laughing.

In the lunch line, Ms. Mitty hears the problematic Basil criticizing the day's meal. "Yuck, it's mystery meat again. Do you think they slaughtered Mr. Dooly's dog?"

Ms. Mitty is outraged. "You will eat what's given to you and stop your complaining," she says, leaning out of the line and forward for emphasis. Basil looks sullen but takes a proffered slab of thin, gray meat. "Just wait until you get in the Army. You won't be so fussy then." She doesn't hear Basil's under-his-breath whisper

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that he intends to go to Yale like his dad, not the freaking Army.

Horsemeat. All they have had to eat for days has been rancid horsemeat. But on such ignoble fare her gallant battalion has managed to storm an artillery site, capture a key city, and hold open the bridge, the crucial bridge to escape, so the last bedraggled prisoners of war can make their way to safety. Jesus, Margaret, a man couldn't have done it better, her staff sergeant says admiringly. He is a grizzled veteran, his stubbled face lined with years of experience. You're the kinda general we look up to. You don't stay in some fancy office sending orders, you come down here in the trenches with your enlisted men. Thanks to you, we'll be able to bring peace back to this troubled land . . .

"Peas?" The server behind the hot-lunch counter is holding a scoop of withered green nuggets out to her.

"War," Ms. Mitty manages to croak. "War and Peace."

The server's weathered face crinkles quizzically but she takes the statement as a yes and dumps the overcooked peas onto the plate.

The rest of the day is tedious. Most of them are. Ms. Mitty much prefers the night. Snuggled down under her Great-Aunt Ellen's quilt, she floats away to foreign lands and alternative lives. All are immensely more satisfying than that of spinster schoolmarm. She is brave. She is beautiful. She excels and is admired. The fate of the world hinges on her decisions. During the velvet night, Ms. Mitty writes Great American Novels, composes Wagnerian arias, replants the fabulous gardens of Versailles around her modest cottage. She is the first woman to step on the moon, the only one to climb Kilimanjaro and back again in a single day.

But not all of her lives are self-serving. Actually, Ms. Mitty specializes in the selfless and heroic. In the soaring night, she discovers a cure for AIDS, heads a wildly successful fund-raising campaign to build six new dormitories at her alma mater, argues a winning capital punishment case before the Supreme Court. (Although here Ms. Mitty is ambivalent. Sometimes, she persuades them to save the poor wretch; at others, she convinces the court to let the evil bastard fry.)

Although she cannot swim, Ms. Mitty saves a drowning child. She ventures out onto thin ice to rescue a freezing mutt. Like John Henry, she props up the timbers of a collapsing coal mine until the men are led to safety. She is exhausted in the morning after such strenuous nights, is barely able to pour her breakfast tea and get to the school in time for playground duty. She manages (barely) to break up a fight between Edgar Belliveau and Basil Bates. And she scoops up the little Saunderson girl, who has fallen off a swing, and while not exactly comforting her (Ms. Mitty hates whiners) she does manage to apply a bandage to her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scraped knee. Small triumphs, to be sure, but they all add to the legend of the fabled Ms. Mitty, Woman Extraordinaire.

The school is strangely quiet today. Amy Peterson and one of the other teachers have taken a large group of students to a state music festival. Margaret Wentworth is left with the stragglers from her own classroom and Amy's. She hands out dittoed maps of the United States, instructs them to fill in the names of the states and their capitals. "Without your books, children. Let's see how well you know this grand country of ours." Ms. Mitty is herself a tad hazy when it comes to Iowa and the Dakotas, but knows she can look it up. After all, isn't that what reference books are for?

The alarm sounds at 11:21. At first, Ms. Mitty *(her filly, Marvelous Margaret, is poised at the gate for that all-important first Derby attempt)* thinks it's the starting bell. Then, perhaps, an early reminder of lunch? But then the intercom squawks a message from the principal: "This is NOT a practice drill. I repeat, NOT a practice drill. Please take your students and evacuate the building in an orderly fashion."

Ms. Mitty insists that the children put their maps and pencils away, then makes sure they are formed into orderly lines. She opens the door. The corridor is filled with thick black smoke. "Oh my," she says, thrilled at the opportunity for her two worlds to mesh. Today, the country will learn that Margaret Wentworth is made of finer stuff.

"Hands, children," Ms. Mitty says, clasping the tiny palm of the little Saunderson girl. "We're going to make a crocodile. Everybody take the hand of the person in back of you and don't let go until I say so." Coughing, she leads the wobbling line out and towards the stairs.

Smoke clogs Ms. Mitty's lungs and stings her eyes. She is aware of leaping flames. She stumbles on the stairs. Someone tugs on her skirt. She can't see him but she recognizes the voice. Her bête noire, Basil Bates.

"Miss Wentworth, Miss Wentworth, we're going the wrong way! The door is at the other end of the hall!"

"Nonsense!" Ms. Mitty is outraged. How dare he interfere with her heroic rescue! "I'm taking you children upstairs. That's where the fire escapes are." *The hook-and-ladder captain's eyes are filled with admiration as she hands her students, one by one, into his strong arms. Save yourself, he begs her. The flames will be upon us any second now. But Ms. Mitty is firm. Not until all the children are down. . . .*

"Besides," she adds, "most of the smoke seems to be down here. The air will be clearer up there."

Basil is frantic. "No, it won't. Smoke rises."

Does it? Science has never been Margaret Wentworth's strong suit. Still, it won't do to admit that before the children. "End of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

line, Basil," Ms. Mitty manages to choke out. "Follow me."

Basil disappears. Or at least his voice ceases. Ms. Mitty struggles up the stairs to the landing, a turn, then up another. The children are like dead weights behind her. She is crawling now and see, the air *is* fresher here near the floor. She drags the children, every one precious to her, to a classroom with an open door, props them near what seem to be the windows, opens one. Too late to find the fire escapes; she'll just have to drop them into the nets. "Help," she croaks. "Help us." The fire engines are just turning the corner.

As she loses consciousness, Margaret Wentworth sees the thick smoke form itself into thirty-six-point black headlines: GALLANT TEACHER SAVES CLASS FROM FLAMES.

When she wakes up, she is in a hospital bed. The patient in the next bed has the evening news on, and a solemn anchorman is intoning: "The death toll continues to mount in the tragic fire at the Timmons Free Elementary School. Police and fire officials are puzzled as to why veteran teacher Margaret Wentworth led her charges to the second floor and away from a safe exit. Six children were critically burned, another six died of smoke inhalation." The announcer's voice turns fatuous. "Among the survivors is ten-year-old Basil Bates, shown here with his friend Edgar Belliveau. Basil and Edgar managed to make it out the front door of the school and alert authorities as to the whereabouts of the missing children and their teacher. Firemen say they might never have found the group otherwise."

The scene cuts to an on-the-spot reporter. "How's it feel to be a hero, Basil?" But Margaret Wentworth mercifully loses consciousness again before she can hear the little twit's reply.

When she wakes a second time, a tall blond doctor is standing at the end of her bed. He takes her vitals, asks how she's feeling. Margaret Wentworth's eyes fill with tears.

The doctor pats her hand sympathetically. "The police want a few words with you, but I told them you weren't ready yet."

Margaret Wentworth nods. It's too painful to speak. *The doctor pats her hand again. You've been through a horrible ordeal, little lady. He looks at her meaningfully. You and I both know that the full story will never come out, that the wolves are always waiting in the wings to criticize. It's highly probable that Basil and Edgar, those two ruffians, set the fire themselves so they could bask in the spotlight. But why ruin young lives, even heinous ones? You, my dear Ms. Wentworth, will take the blame. But it won't be for naught. I've been searching all my life for a woman like you, tough, dauntless, dare I say noble? This summer, I plan to leave my lucrative practice and go to darkest Africa. The need for medical attention has never been greater there. Might I dare ask, might I dare hope, that you—the incomparable Margaret Wentworth—will accompany me?"* ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Problem of Suicide Cottage

by Edward D. Hoch

It was a sunny day in 1976 and plans were well under way for Dr. Sam Hawthorne's eightieth birthday party. He'd grumbled about all the fuss, preferring to spend the day quietly, but that was not to be. His visitor was a familiar one, always a joy to see. "You tell stories to old friends but never to me. Now it's my turn. You promised me one for your eightieth birthday and this is it. I want to know about that summer of nineteen forty-four."

He smiled and said, "I usually supply a bit of libation to go with my stories. How about a glass of sherry?"

"I'd prefer scotch if you don't mind. Scotch and water would be fine."

A scroll winner in the 2006 *EQMM* Readers Award competition, Edward D. Hoch has provided countless hours of entertainment for this magazine's readers and editors. The Dr. Sam Hawthorne series, to which this new tale belongs, gives us a tantalizing glimpse of the beloved series sleuth on his eightieth birthday. More than thirty years after the first Dr. Sam case appeared, it's not only the masterful impossible-crime plots but the series characters that continue to surprise us. †

It was an exciting summer (Dr. Sam began, after he'd supplied the refreshments). The Allies had stormed the French beaches on June 6th, landing in Normandy at dawn following an airborne attack further inland. Despite heavy casualties, the landings were successful and a second wave of troops quickly followed. Back home in Northmont things were relatively quiet as I awaited the birth of our first child. Annabel's baby was due in late July and she'd already decided if it was a boy it should be called Sam Junior. I wasn't too happy with the idea and it was still under discussion.

©2007 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Annabel had turned over the daily routine at the Ark to her assistant when her pregnancy reached the eight-month mark in late June, though she insisted on remaining on call for any unusual veterinary problems. I readily agreed with her suggestion that we wait out the final month at a cottage on Chester Lake just a few miles from town. It was peaceful there, though I still made a few house calls and my nurse April knew how to reach me in an emergency.

Chester Lake was a placid body of water about a mile wide and five miles long, named after an early landowner in the area. I'd spent a summer there in 1929 when I'd solved a mystery involving some people who vanished from a houseboat and it was there, at the age of 33, that I'd fallen in love for the first time. Her name was Miranda Grey and I often wondered what became of her.

We'd barely unloaded the car for our month-long stay before Annabel started kidding me about her. "Too bad we couldn't have rented the cottage where Miranda Grey stayed with her aunt and uncle. I'll bet it would have brought back fond memories."

All I could give her was a sigh. "I should have known better than to tell you about Miranda. It only lasted a few months."

All the small one-story cottages at Chester Lake were similar, and as soon as I entered the one we'd rented I was transported back to 1929. The entire front half of the house was given over to the living room with a small fireplace. There was a single bedroom in the left rear. The kitchen and bathroom occupied the right rear, with a back door leading out to the gravel driveway. If there were more than two people staying overnight someone had to sleep on a foldaway bed in the living room. It was a perfect place for the two of us since it discouraged unwanted visitors.

"I guess it's like a second honeymoon," Annabel said, settling in. "Or it would be if it weren't for this bump." She patted her stomach fondly and gazed up at the living room ceiling. "I wonder what that hook is for."

"Probably a hanging plant. I doubt it's for any erotic activity."

"Sheriff Lens mentioned there'd been some burglaries up here last summer. If we catch a thief we can hang him by his wrists."

"You should be thinking only nice thoughts these days," I suggested.

"Yes, Doctor."

"And the sheriff did tell us they'd installed new locks on all the cottage doors this season."

That was when we heard a knocking on the screen door and I went to answer it. A smiling man of about my age stood there, wearing bathing trunks and an undershirt. "Dr. Hawthorne, you probably don't remember me."

"Well, I—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Raspin, Jerry Raspin. I was one of the trustees at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital a few years back."

"Of course!" I told him, because I did remember him then. He had a real-estate business that had been fairly profitable before the war.

"Probably didn't recognize me without my suit on. I have the cottage next-door."

"Come in," I urged, trying to make amends for my hesitation.

He followed me in, as Annabel hurriedly wrapped a robe around her bulging belly. "I hope I'm not intruding, Mrs. Hawthorne," he said. "I'm your neighbor for the month of July. The wife and I have the next cottage."

"How nice," Annabel said.

"We may not be here the entire month," I explained. "My wife is expecting our first child in a few weeks."

"Well, congratulations! That's great news." He helped himself to a seat on our sofa.

"Do you take a cottage here each summer?" Annabel asked.

Jerry Raspin nodded. "The wife likes it, and there's nowhere else to go with this gas rationing. I sure hope the war ends soon. My old clunker of a car won't last much longer."

"The news is pretty good," I told him. "The Allies are advancing on all fronts."

Raspin nodded. "We have a son who just got drafted. I'm hoping the war ends about the time he finishes his basic training."

Annabel glanced out the side window. "Your cottage looks pretty much like ours."

"They're all about the same on this side of the lake. Yours has one distinction, though. The regulars here call it suicide cottage."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"Each of the last two summers there's been a suicide here. In 'forty-two it was an elderly man and last year it was a young woman whose husband had been killed by the Japanese in the Solomon Islands. A terrible tragedy!"

"I remember both of them," I said, "but I hadn't realized they were both in this same cottage."

"I'm sure you two will break the jinx," he replied with a smile, trying to make light of it.

Annabel snorted. "Two instances hardly qualify as a jinx, Mr. Raspin. I'd call it a coincidence."

About that time he must have decided that his visit had been ill-timed. "I'd better be getting back. We'll talk again."

I saw him to the door and then returned to Annabel. "Can we stand a month of him in the next cottage?" she asked.

"I remember that his wife was nice. I met her once at a hospital function when he was a trustee."

"All this talk of suicide—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There'll be none here this month. I promise you that."

On the night of July 4th the Chester Lake residents marked the occasion with a display of railroad flares that ringed the shoreline. A few cottages even fired skyrockets and small firecrackers, but these were hard to come by in our area. The following morning was a Wednesday that year, and the day dawned bright and sunny. Already before breakfast there were children splashing in the water. Annabel watched them fondly from our porch.

"One of those could be our Sam a few years from now. We'll have to come back here again." Later in the morning she even went wading herself, with me standing nervously behind her in case she started to fall.

We had a telephone in the kitchen and every morning I checked in with April at my office. But it was a quiet July and the most serious case she had to report was one of the Walker boys being stung by wasps. He was one of those kids who were always getting into trouble and I remembered last summer when he'd gone missing from his parents' cottage and been feared drowned at Chester Lake. After a day of dragging the lake they'd found him hiding in a tiny crawlspace behind the kitchen sink.

The following Monday I drove Annabel in to see her obstetrician, our old friend Lincoln Jones, and he reported that all seemed to be going well. "Another two weeks at most," he predicted.

Back at the cottage we became acquainted with another of our neighbors. Mrs. Spring was a petite woman in her late forties who'd been a nurse in Boston. She lived two doors down from us, in the opposite direction from Jerry Raspin and his wife. "I'm right next to Judge Hastings," she told us, pausing in her stroll along the water's edge to chat. "You know the judge, don't you?"

I did know Hastings, a popular man around town, but hadn't realized his cottage was next to ours. I'd seen no activity there since we arrived. After Mrs. Spring had continued on her walk, I said to Annabel, "If the judge is really next-door I should call on him to say hello. I'll take a walk over there."

At first I thought my knocking at the door would be met only by silence, but after the second knock I saw movement behind the curtains and Judge Hastings himself opened the door, as tall and formidable as he appeared on the bench. "Well, Sam Hawthorne! What brings you here?"

"Annabel and I have had the cottage next-door since the first of the month and I only now found out you were here. I didn't see anyone around and assumed it was empty."

He seemed hesitant about inviting me in, and finally compromised by motioning toward the porch chairs. "Maud hasn't been feeling well," he explained. "That's why you haven't seen us out."

I chose one of the two Adirondack chairs and settled into it. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hope it's nothing serious. If she needs a physician, I'm right next-door."

"No, no." He rejected the possibility with a wave of his hand. "It's not serious. Is this your first summer here?"

"The first since our marriage. I visited here years ago, but somehow with my practice I never had time for a real vacation till now. Annabel's expecting our first child this month and I wanted to be with her as much as possible."

"There's nothing like a first child, Sam. I can still remember when Rory was born, though it's close to thirty years ago now."

"How's he doing?"

"Air Force lieutenant. We're very proud of him."

"You should be. He's helping to win this war for us."

The door opened, surprisingly, and Maud Hastings came out to join us. She was a decade younger than the judge, but just then she seemed older. She wore no makeup and she'd put on weight since I last saw her. I suspected her problems were more emotional than physical. "Hello, Doctor," she addressed me with some formality. Perhaps she thought her husband had summoned me in my professional capacity.

"How've you been, Maud?"

"Better. I'm on my feet again, at least."

Judge Hastings seemed as surprised as I was by her unexpected appearance. "Shouldn't you be resting, dear?"

"I've had enough resting to last through the summer. I want to see what's going on out here."

"Nothing much. Sam and his wife have the next cabin."

She glanced over at it. "Suicide cabin."

"Didn't know that when we rented it," I told her.

Judge Hastings cleared his throat. "We were here last summer when that young woman took an overdose of sleeping pills. She couldn't go on after her husband was killed."

"How'd the first one die?" I asked. "The old man."

"Shot himself. The place was a mess after that. Owner had to hire people to wash away the blood and repaint the living room."

"Any doubt about either of them?" I asked, because that was the sort of question I always asked.

"Sheriff Lens was called out both times, but the cottage doors were locked and bolted from the inside."

"Windows?"

"Those too, Sam. Don't worry, you'd have heard about it if there was anything suspicious."

About then I saw a familiar figure strolling along the rocky shoreline. It was Jerry Raspin, my new friend from the previous week, and I assumed the woman with him was his wife. When he saw us on the porch he changed his route and walked over. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nodded to me and then addressed the judge's wife. "Good to see you up and about again, Maud. Feeling better?"

"Very much better, thank you."

"This weather would make anyone feel better." He turned to me. "Dr. Hawthorne, this is my wife, Susan."

I smiled and shook her hand. "I believe we met at one of the hospital functions some years ago." She was a large woman, about her husband's size, and I imagined they made a matching set on the local social scene, where Annabel and I rarely ventured.

Our mailman, a little fellow named Cally Forbes, had appeared at the next cottage, the one rented by Mrs. Spring. Since the cottage mail in this section was usually left in a row of boxes on the street, I assumed he must have some sort of special-delivery item for her. "I'd better go see what Cally wants," I decided, when his knocking on the door yielded no response.

He turned as I approached. "I have a special delivery for Mrs. Spring. Do you know if she's around?"

"I was talking to her earlier, Cally. She probably just drove into town. Is it something you can leave with me?"

"No, she has to sign for it. Thanks anyway, Dr. Hawthorne. I'll try again later."

"I saw her yesterday," Susan Raspin volunteered when I returned to the porch, "but not to talk to. She was going somewhere in her car. I think she has problems."

After a bit more chatting about the weather and the beauties of Chester Lake, Raspin and his wife moved on and I returned home too. Whatever the cause of Maud Hastings's illness, she seemed to have recovered now.

The following day, Tuesday, President Roosevelt announced he would run for a fourth term, bringing further grumbles from those who felt there should be term limits for the President. But the nation was behind him and few thought New York's Governor Dewey would be able to defeat him.

Annabel's assistant had phoned earlier with an emergency involving a dozen undernourished cats being kept by an elderly widow. "I have to go in to help her for an hour or two," she told me as she grabbed the key to our old Buick. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"You'd better be! I don't want my son delivered at Annabel's Ark."

It was early afternoon when Mrs. Spring appeared at our door, wondering if anyone was home. "I'm right here," I called out, going to greet her. "My wife had to go in to the Ark."

"Was the mailman looking for me?" she asked.

"Cally Forbes? He had something yesterday you had to sign for. Said he'd be back later and try again."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I must have been at the grocery store and missed him."

"Maybe he'll try again today. I haven't seen him yet this afternoon." I invited her in and offered her a cup of tea, which she accepted.

"That's very kind of you," she told me as I poured hot water over the tea bag. "Please call me Grace. I feel like an old lady having tea in the afternoon. Because I'm a widow, everyone feels sorry for me."

"Did your husband die in the war?"

"Nothing so dramatic. He died of cancer in prison. He'd been drinking and he killed a teenage girl with his car."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to kill myself like last year's widow."

"I hope not."

"This tea tastes good."

I smiled and said, "I should have offered you a beer, but I'm not sure we have any."

I told her about my visit to Judge Hastings the previous day. "Apparently his wife had been ill, but she's better now. She came out on the porch and talked a bit."

"Maud imagines all sorts of things. She's no sicker than you or me. She's just looking for pity from her husband." She hesitated and then continued, "One night I caught her peering in the window of my cottage."

"Why would she do that?"

Grace Spring sighed. "Perhaps she thought I was entertaining the judge."

"Oh."

"I wasn't. I'd never do anything like that."

"I believe you."

Just then the telephone in the kitchen rang and I went to answer it. Annabel was on the phone, saying she'd be another hour at the Ark. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"Fine. I'll be home in an hour."

"Okay. Maybe we'll go out for dinner."

We chatted a few minutes longer and I heard Grace Spring call out, "I have to go now. Thanks for the tea." The screen door opened and closed before I could say goodbye.

Annabel came home shortly after five, and I could see she was a bit tired. "Do you want to just rest?" I asked.

"No, I'm hungry. I just don't have the energy to make dinner for us."

"That's easily solved. We'll drive in to Max's Steakhouse. We haven't seen him in a few weeks anyway."

"Sounds good to me. He always has something I can eat. Call him and make sure he's got a table."

The night had grown cooler and I decided to wear a jacket.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While Annabel changed her clothes I locked and bolted the front door and made sure all the windows were latched, remembering Sheriff Lens's warning about burglaries. As we were exiting out the back door she spied the teacup and saucer I'd put in the sink. "What's this? Have you become a secret tea drinker?"

I chuckled. "Forgot to tell you, Grace Spring stopped by and I gave her some tea. She's had a hard life." I locked the back door as we left and I told her about Grace's visit as we drove into town.

"You're on a first-name basis with her now, I see."

"Yeah, Grace Spring is my secret lover."

"You never know. Things happen at summer cottages."

"They sure happen at ours. People commit suicide."

I swung into the Steakhouse parking lot. Max was glad to see us, as always, and asked if he could send over his usual bottle of wine. Annabel demurred and I settled for just one glass. It was a pleasant meal, and only Annabel's condition had us leaving earlier than usual. We drove by our house and stopped to pick up any mail that hadn't been forwarded to the cottage. It had just gotten dark by the time we returned to Chester Lake. I pulled up and parked behind the cottage, then helped Annabel out of the car and slid my key into the lock. It turned, but the door didn't open.

"What's the matter with this?" I asked.

"The inside bolt must be on."

"How could that be unless there's someone inside?"

We went around to the front door with the same results. "I threw the bolt on that myself," I said, "but the back door couldn't be bolted. The cottage was empty when we left."

There were no lights on and we could see nothing inside the darkened cottage. I went back to the car, took out the flashlight I carried in the glove compartment, and shone it through the glass in the kitchen door. I could see nothing unusual and went around to one of the living room windows. Annabel started to follow me but I made her get back in the car and lock the doors. I didn't like the looks of this at all.

I took a moment to peer into the living room by the flashlight's glow, then shut it off and walked quickly next-door to Jerry Raspin's cottage, where a light was burning. "May I use your phone?" I asked Susan when she came to the door. "It's an emergency."

"Of course," she said, looking puzzled.

"What is it?" Jerry asked, but I didn't answer.

I gave the operator the sheriff's number and when he answered I spoke quickly. "I'm at our cottage. You'd better come out right away. It's locked but I looked through the window and I can see Grace Spring's body hanging from a hook in our ceiling."

Behind me, Susan Raspin screamed.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sheriff Lens arrived with two deputies within fifteen minutes. "What is it, Doc?" he asked grimly.

"I've checked both doors and all the windows. They're all locked from the inside. I wanted you here to do the break-in. I could see from the angle of her neck that she's dead."

"Another suicide in this cabin?"

"That's what we're meant to think. But how did she get in?"

The sheriff smashed the glass in the kitchen door and pulled open the bolt so I could unlock the door with my key. Annabel was out of the car now, standing by my side, but I wouldn't allow her into the house. Once inside, I turned on the lights and confirmed that Mrs. Spring was dead. "Probably more than an hour ago," I guessed. I gave the sheriff a timetable of when we'd left for dinner and returned, then told him about the dead woman's visit that afternoon. Her teacup still sat in the sink.

"Nobody here," one of the deputies reported, finishing his search of the cottage. He even glanced in the tiny crawlspace behind the kitchen sink, removing a little stepladder I stored there.

Sheriff Lens looked over the scene, examining a footstool placed some three inches below her dangling feet. "Get some pictures of this before we cut her down. And fingerprints of the doorknobs and bolts, if I didn't smudge them too badly." He turned to me. "What do you think, Doc?"

"It's a poor attempt to make it look like suicide. The rope was one I had in the kitchen. She's too short to have stood on that stool and put the noose around her neck. Besides which, she assured me just this afternoon that she wasn't going to kill herself like last year's widow in this cottage."

"But how did she get in with the doors and windows locked, and if it's murder how did her killer get out?"

"I assume there are no tunnels in the basement," I replied.

"Heck, Doc, these cottages don't even have basements!"

I went over the locks carefully. They were the latest Yale models, each with individual keys, and Sheriff Lens assured me there was no chance of someone else's key opening my doors. Likewise, a careful inspection of all the windows showed no cracks or defective locks. I turned my attention briefly to the fireplace, but the flue was barely large enough for a squirrel. I know of trickery involving thread or fishing lines used to pull bolts shut from outside the room, but there was no space around the tight-fitting doors to allow such a stunt. I even considered the remote possibility that the hanging body itself might have been used to pull a string and slide a bolt closed, but there was no string in evidence and those door bolts didn't slide easily.

"I'm stumped," I admitted.

"Come on, Doc," the sheriff chided me. "You've solved cases a lot tougher than this one."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Maybe it'll look better by daylight."

I watched while Grace Spring's body was cut down and removed for the autopsy. Only after the sheriff and his men had departed did I call next-door and allow Annabel to return from her safe haven at the Raspins' cottage. "Is it all right to stay here tonight?" I asked. "Or would you rather go back home?"

"I'll be fine here."

"When I phoned the sheriff to tell him about Grace's body, Susan Raspin screamed. She seemed to take the news very hard."

Annabel nodded. "She was still pretty shook up. Apparently she was close to Grace Spring. She said someone had been sending Grace threatening letters, almost like blackmail letters."

"Interesting." I thought about that bit of information. "But as the mystery writer Raymond Chandler once noted, blackmailers don't shoot. They have nothing to gain from killing off a source of income."

"What could a woman like Mrs. Spring have done that would cause her to be blackmailed?"

"Almost anything, I suppose. She told me her husband died in prison after a drunk-driving accident."

I checked all the doors and windows again, making certain they were locked and bolted before we went to bed. But sleeping wasn't easy. I kept thinking of Annabel at my side, only a week or so away from giving birth. Perhaps suicide cottage wasn't the best place for either of us.

I was up before eight, wandering around the little cottage, going through the kitchen to use the bathroom, and Annabel joined me a short time later. As I fixed breakfast for us, she remarked, "Maybe we should have slept at home. All I could think of was that woman hanging there, even though you wouldn't let me see her. I guess this really is the suicide cottage."

"That wasn't suicide. Someone killed her."

"Even with all the doors and windows locked?"

"She got in here somehow, and if she could get in, the killer could get out."

Sheriff Lens arrived a bit after nine o'clock, looking as if he'd been up most of the night. "We have a preliminary autopsy report. Doc's still working on it, but there are finger marks on her throat. She was strangled before she was hanged."

"How terrible!" Annabel said with a compassionate tremor in her voice. "But why pick this cottage? Just because of its reputation for suicides?"

"Apparently." I told the sheriff, "Susan Raspin in the next cottage thinks Grace was being blackmailed."

"Her husband was convicted of drunk driving a few years back,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but some folks thought he took the blame for her. Then he died in prison."

"She mentioned her husband when she was here yesterday, and apparently she told Susan Raspin she'd been threatened."

"I'll dig out the records and look into it. Are you two staying around here, Doc?"

"For now."

He left us then and I saw Judge Hastings coming over from his place. "Did he have any new information, Sam?"

"Not much. She was strangled before the killer hanged her, so it certainly wasn't suicide."

We sat on the porch for a bit discussing it while Annabel remained inside. "If there's a killer on the prowl, none of us are safe," he told me.

"Do you have any idea why someone might have been blackmailing Grace Spring? Maybe something about her husband's accident?"

He thought about it, rubbing his lean jaw. "I heard that case in my courtroom. There was a suspicion she'd been driving, but he took the blame and we had to accept that. A girl was killed and I had to give him prison time. We discovered later he knew he was dying of cancer and maybe that's why he was willing to take the blame."

A mailman came by carrying a leather sack. "Does your mail get delivered right to the cottages?" he asked us.

The judge shook his head. "There's a line of boxes across the road. You must be new to this route. Where's Cally Forbes?"

"He called in sick this morning. Long as I'm here I might as well give you the mail."

Judge Hastings accepted a couple of letters, but the only thing for Annabel and me was a doctor's bill that I'd told Lincoln Jones to send us. "I'd better be getting back to Maud," the judge decided. "She's having a bad day."

"Anything I can help out with?"

"No, no. It's just—"

"Change of life?"

"Yes. Some women like Maud really suffer through it."

"There's a new medication that might help. Ask her to make an appointment with April at my office. I'd be happy to come in and examine her any time she wants."

"Thank you, Sam."

After he'd left I went back inside. Annabel was resting in one of the easy chairs when the phone rang. The cord was twisted awkwardly and it took me a moment to unwind it. Sheriff Lens was on the other end. "I don't have much on Grace Spring, Doc. I tried to track the parents of the girl who was killed in that accident but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they live in Chicago. They were just here visiting the wife's brother when it happened."

I barely heard his words. I was staring at the telephone cord, trying to remember the last time we'd used it. I thought it was last night when I phoned Max's Steakhouse for a table. "Sheriff," I said quietly, "I think you'd better come over here."

"Who was that?" Annabel wondered, following me outside when I returned to the porch.

"Just Sheriff Lens. He had some new information about the dead woman. I suggested he take a ride over here."

"Are you getting anywhere with this?" she asked.

"Maybe."

I shifted the conversation to the weather, commenting on the cloudless blue sky and the comfortable temperature. She was so close to delivery that I didn't want to upset or frighten her in any way. When I saw the sheriff's car pull up behind the cottage I suggested she might go over to visit Susan Raspin, who'd come out onto her porch.

"What is it, Sam?" my wife asked. "Why don't you want me here?"

"I just thought you'd be more comfortable there."

"I'm staying," she said firmly. Annabel could be stubborn at times.

Sheriff Lens entered through the kitchen door, an expectant look on his face. "You've figured it out, haven't you, Doc?"

"I think so."

"Well, tell us!" my wife demanded. "Why are you so nervous about it?"

"All right," I said. "I think we've shown that Grace Spring couldn't have killed herself. And we've also shown that her killer couldn't possibly have left this cottage after he killed her. I think it was Sherlock Holmes who once remarked that when you've excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

"What are you saying, Doc?"

"The killer was here, and couldn't have left through the locked doors or windows. Therefore, the killer is still here."

The sheriff's hand dropped instinctively to the butt of his holstered revolver. "That's impossible."

"Is it? My first problem was how Grace Spring got in here in the first place. And why. I thought I'd heard her leave yesterday afternoon while I was on the phone with Annabel. She'd been drinking a cup of tea, but she called out she was leaving and I heard the screen door open and close. I noticed this morning that our phone cord was oddly twisted. Someone other than Annabel or me had used the phone after we left. That's when I started suspecting that Grace hadn't left at all. She'd hidden here and phoned her killer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

after we left for dinner. She'd heard me tell Annabel we'd probably go out for dinner and realized suicide cottage was the perfect setting for what she had in mind."

"And what was that?"

"She was going to kill her blackmailer and make it look like one more suicide."

"But where could she have hidden?" my wife asked. "This place isn't that big. Even the crawlspace behind the sink was too crowded with that ladder in it."

"She was a small woman. It only took her a moment whle I was on the phone to partly open the foldaway bed in the living room and slip inside." Their eyes went to the sofa and I kept on talking. "Once we were gone she came out and phoned her blackmailer, arranging for him to meet her here on some pretext, probably promising him money. While she waited, she may have slipped out the back door and gone over to her cottage for a weapon. She was ready when he arrived, probably with a gun. That would be the most likely weapon to fake a suicide."

"You're saying the blackmailer killed her?" Sheriff Lens asked. "But if she had a gun why didn't she shoot him?"

"They must have struggled over it and he choked her to death. Once he'd done that, he strung her up to the ceiling hook in hopes we'd miss the finger marks on her throat. It would have been one more death in suicide cottage."

"Are you telling me that the killer took her place in the foldaway bed, that he's still there now?"

"That's just what I'm telling you. He figured we'd never spend the night here after finding the body, and once it was established as a suicide he'd simply walk out the back door. Only we stayed and he was trapped here."

That was when Sheriff Lens walked over and lifted the sofa seat to check inside. Maybe he thought my idea was too crazy to be true. Maybe it didn't occur to him that if I was right the killer might be in there with Grace's gun. As the foldaway bed opened and he came into view, he pointed the gun at me and Annabel did the craziest thing she'd ever done. She launched herself at him like a fury, baby and all. . . .

Old Dr. Sam finished his story and his drink. Looking into his listener's eyes, he said, "You were born that night, Samantha, one week early."

"And the killer was . . . ?"

"Our postman, Cally Forbes, of course. He was small like Grace Spring and able to hide in there easily. He'd even gotten out of bed early that morning to use our phone and call in sick. He couldn't just leave, though, because we'd have discovered the unbolted door and known he'd been hiding. He was the uncle of the girl killed in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the accident, and he was convinced Grace had been driving. She started paying him money, maybe out of a guilty conscience, but finally she decided she'd have to kill him. She lured him here after we went to dinner and was waiting with the gun. Most postmen have strong arms and he got the gun away from her, strangling her in the process. Then he found the rope, tied it around her throat to cover the bruises, and lifted her up to that hook with the aid of my stepladder. He put that away and only realized at the last minute she'd have needed something to stand on. He placed the stool there, not realizing in the near-darkness that it was too low."

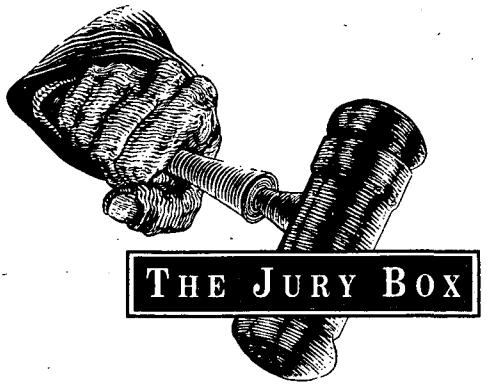
Samantha shook her head in wonder. "Mom could have killed herself jumping at him like that. She could have killed me!"

"I guess that's why we never told you about it till now. You want another scotch?"

She pushed the long dark hair from her beautiful eyes and smiled. "No, let's go join Mom and the grandkids." ●

"I'M SORRY, DID I STARTLE YOU?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Our annual short-story roundup begins with two of the best single-author collections of recent years, one by a major figure in contemporary literature, the other by a writer unknown to me until her book arrived. Their stories are expertly crafted, deftly written, and psychologically complex, offering suspense, surprise, irony, and social observation, with a variety of backgrounds and viewpoint characters of various ages and stations in life, though not much detection in any conventional sense.

**** Joyce Carol Oates: *The Female of the Species: Tales of Mystery and Suspense,* Harcourt/Penzler, $24 hardcover; $13 trade paper. Nine stories, three from *EQMM* and one from *AHMM,* demonstrate Oates's consummate mastery of character and narrative. From "So Help Me God," a suspenseful account of a subtly abusive marriage, to "Angel of Mercy," a chilling ghost story about the psychological pitfalls of a nursing career, every story offers something unusual and develops in unexpected ways. The hardcover was published in early 2006, the trade paperback in early 2007.

**** Jean Rae Baxter: *A Twist of Malice,* Seraphim, $19.95 Canadian, $17.95 U.S. Baxter has the storyteller's knack of gripping the reader throughout, and she brings her characters to life in economical strokes. "Catnappers," about 11-year-old twin girl criminals; "Josie's Custom Catering," a job-based James M. Cain-style triangle; and "A Wanton Disregard," in which a grieving widow plots revenge on the negligent driver who killed her husband and child, illustrate the variety of situations and approaches. Some of the fourteen stories, all but five criminous, were first published in various Canadian journals and anthologies. The book was first published in Canada in late 2005.

*** Jeffery Deaver: *More Twisted: Collected Stories, Vol. II,* Simon & Schuster, $24.95. Knowing master manipulator Deaver is out to mislead, the

©2007 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wise reader takes nothing at face value. Thus, you may guess part of the surprise some of the time, but he'll still fool you most of the time. Of these sixteen tales, three are new to print, five from *EQMM,* and two from *AHMM.* As evidence that this kind of trick construction works best at shorter lengths, the longest entry, "Locard's Principle," a novelette-length original about Lincoln Rhyme, series sleuth of Deaver's novels, is much the weakest.

*** Michael Lister: *Flesh and Blood and Other John Jordan Stories,* Pottersville, $24.95. These seven stories featuring complex and engaging Florida prison chaplain Jordan represent various suspense and puzzle-spinning approaches, but the most memorable are centered on theological mysteries: a nun who is medically declared both pregnant and a virgin; a 10-year-old Hurricane Katrina refugee who claims to be Jesus Christ; and a consideration of the pros and cons of the Shroud of Turin. Margaret Coel, whose own novels feature a painfully chaste relationship somewhat similar to Jordan's with a prison coworker, provides an introduction.

*** Amy Myers: *Murder, 'Orrible Murder,* Crippen & Landru, $43 signed limited hardcover, $18 trade paper. Six of these seventeen by an expert in fairly clued semi-comic historical detection first appeared in *EQMM.* Victorian-era chef Auguste Didier appears in half a dozen (of which "Murder at the Soirée," set at a temperance dinner, is especially amusing and clever); the goddess Aphrodite in four, chimney sweep Tom Wasp in three, Sherlock Holmes in one.

*** Dennis Lehane: *Coronado: Stories,* Morrow, $24.95. One of the most highly regarded contemporary writers of gritty hardboiled crime fiction presents five stories, four previously published, plus the full-length play of the title, complexly constructed and thematically ambitious, which expands on its short-story source, "Until Gwen." The line between pretentiousness and profundity is sometimes difficult to locate, but Lehane's way with language and creation of unusual characters and situations can't be denied.

*** Faye Kellerman: *The Garden of Eden and Other Criminal Delights,* Warner, $24.95. Series cop Peter Decker appears in four strong stories, two of them new, twice with and twice without wife Rina Lazarus. The other 13 entries, including one from *EQMM,* are enjoyable enough, but the author's nonfictional memory of working in her father's deli, one of four non-criminous reflections on family life, may be the best piece in the book.

*** Max Allan Collins and Matthew V. Clemens: *My Lolita Complex and Other Tales of Sex and Violence,* Twilight Tales, $12.95. These nine stories, all from original anthologies, comprise a contemporary equivalent of the under-the-counter *Spicy* pulps of the 1930s and '40s. The collection begins and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ends strongly with the Civil War historical "A Woman's Touch" and the title tale, and even stories written to order with dubious reasons for being (visits to the Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Hellboy universes, two pastiches about a newly married James Bond clone named John Sand) are accomplished with humor and solid professionalism.

*** Erle Stanley Gardner: *The Casebook of Sidney Zoom,* edited and introduced by Bill Pronzini, Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. The adventures of edge-of-the-law righter of wrongs Zoom, if not quite as engaging as those about the slightly later Lester Leith, add to the evidence that Gardner was among the greatest of pulp fiction writers as well as among the most prolific. Since appearing in early-1930s issues of *Detective Fiction Weekly,* only one of these ten has been reprinted: "The First Stone" (retitled "The Case of the Scattered Rubies") in the March 1959 *EQMM.*

*** Donna Jo Napoli and Robert Furrow: *Sly the Sleuth and the Food Mysteries,* illustrated by Heather Maione, Dial, $16.99. Three cases for preteen suburban detective Sylvia (known as Sly) are unthreatening and humorous neighborhood mysteries appropriate to the target audience of ages seven and up, but they have a sneaky complexity, including fairly laid clues, that lays the groundwork for appreciation of adult detection.

** Cindy Rosmus: *Angel of Manslaughter,* Black Petals, $10. Fifteen very short stories, all but two previously published in *Hardboiled* and various mostly small-circulation magazines, take erotic noir to the limit: pessimistic, chilling, sexually explicit, too dark and grim for most tastes, but done with undeniable skill.

Recommended on the basis of a sampling are two more volumes in Crippen & Landru's Lost Classics Series (both $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper): Rafael Sabatini's *The Evidence of the Sword and Other Mysteries,* pioneering historical mysteries edited and introduced by Jesse F. Knight; and Ellis Peters's *The Trinity Cat and Other Mysteries,* a variety of stories and novellas from the creator of Brother Cadfael, introduced by Martin Edwards, who edited the volume with the late Sue Feder. . . . Manjiri Prabhu's *The Astral Alibi* (Bantam, $6.99), about Pune, India, private eye Sonia Samarth, makes enjoyable reading if you can accept the use of astrology as a detection tool. . . . Two mixed collections of some criminous interest are James Sallis's *Potato Tree* (Host, $25 hardcover, $15 trade paper) and Nicholas Royle's *Mortality* (Serpent's Tail, $14.95). . . . Editor Peter Haining gathers and introduces Charles Dickens's detective stories in *Hunted Down* (Dufour/Peter Owen, $22.95), first published in Britain in 1996.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CAMOUFLAGE

by Alanna Knight

Charlie negotiated the car round the suburban estate bordering the racecourse in search of a suitably inconspicuous parking place.

As always, that first glimpse of his destination with its shrill buzz of animation set his adrenalin pumping. Elation, fierce and strange, seized him. His body grew firmer, stronger, tense as a hurdler crouched on the starting line, ready for the demands soon to be made upon it.

His mind now stretched beyond the poolroom or the television screen and took on an extra sense of perception, so that when he climbed out of the car in the quiet tree-lined street, he was immediately aware of being watched.

Cautiously, he turned. A youngster, perhaps eleven or twelve, small and thin, with a bland freckled face, was writing down his car number in a small notebook, his expression one of eager triumph.

"Nice Rolls, mister," he said cheerfully, "bit old-fashioned, but I collect car numbers. Been waiting for a '72 for weeks. Saw a '73 and a '74 yesterday, had to let them go. Just my luck. Be months before I get them now." A sigh, and looking from Charlie to the car and back again, he frowned. "Your car, mister, is it?"

"I'm breaking it in for a friend," said Charlie sarcastically, restraining the impulse to sudden violence. *Keep calm, unobtrusive. Don't do anything that'll make you remembered.*

"You don't look the Rolls type, mister," said the lad, eyeing Charlie's shabby clothes with disarming frankness.

"Piss off!" said Charlie. Not looking the Rolls type was one of the

A novelist with sixty published titles, as well as a distinguished short-story writer, playwright, and biographer, Alanna Knight hails from Edinburgh, Scotland. Her fiction includes Gothic and historical pieces; as a biographer she is especially noted for her works on Robert Louis Stevenson. Fans of her crime fiction will be glad to see the latest from Allison & Busby, *The Inspector's Daughter.* ✝

©2007 by Alanna Knight

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

keys to Charlie's professional success, for as nature protects her wild creatures with the boon of camouflage, the ability to blend and merge, becoming one with their surroundings when danger threatens, she had seen fit to do as much for Charlie, by making him inconspicuous.

Everything about him was ordinary to such a degree that his exact age was by no means certain, thirty-five or fifty would have fitted, his features forgettable, his body medium-sized, medium height, so ordinary that no one would give him a second glance.

Charlie was the archetypal one of a crowd. Not for him the pleasures of scientific progress, cyberspace, the Internet, mobiles—such things spelt danger—an ordinary telephone used cautiously was as far as he would go.

Only one thing would have given his profession away to the discerning eye of a clever detective: his hands. Beautiful hands. Long, slender, of amazing flexibility, with fine, tapering fingers. The hands of a surgeon, a musician—or a pickpocket!

True, most people would despise such an occupation, but to Charlie, who had been discovered as an eight-year-old prodigy by a latter-day Fagin more than half a century ago, his job was a profession, an art in which he took tremendous pride, despite a sometimes capricious income. No wife, sex a commodity he could buy. No bank account for Charlie. A loose floorboard and a home safe in the modest terrace house where he was born sixty years ago. His only vanity was to travel in style. The car was his own, another piece of camouflage, since no one would ever associate a vintage Rolls with a common pickpocket.

"You still here, mister?" The lad had pocketed his notebook and was walking round the car touching it with an air of reverence. "Don't make them like this these days," he said. But Charlie wasn't listening, that notebook containing the registration number filled him with vague unease. Then he had an inspiration, the solution.

"Like to sit at the wheel, see what it feels like?"

"Wouldn't I just, mister!" The boy's homely face was transformed.

"Hop in, then!" The bait had been swallowed, and helping the lad open the door, Charlie deftly removed the notebook from his pocket.

Tolerating a few moments of "zoom, zoom" admiration, he said sharply: "That's enough. You'll make me late."

"Goin' to the races?"

In answer Charlie locked the door and slung his raincoat over his arm.

The lad grinned, pointing to a cloudless blue sky. "You won't be needing that. Ain't goin' to rain today."

"I might feel the cold," snapped Charlie impatiently.

"You a stranger here, mister?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No. Why?"

"Just wondered. The punters use the car park at the course, and it's free, too."

That was a poser. Difficult to explain the advantages of a quiet place for a quick getaway. "Don't like crowds," mumbled Charlie and walked briskly towards the course. The lad trotted at his side. "You ask lots of questions, don't you?"

An apologetic grin. "Way to get information." At the entrance, he stopped, asked wistfully: "Don't suppose you could lend me a quid, mister?"

"Certainly not! Who do you think—"

"Me dad was supposed to be meeting me," the lad interrupted and gave a helpless shrug. "He's not here."

"Tell me another," said Charlie, but the pressing need to get rid of his unwanted companion made him withdraw a folded pound note from his pocket. "Now clear off."

He had missed the first race but it wasn't until after the third that he ever made a strike. Might as well fleece 'em for a cool thousand bucks than their first modest winnings, was his motto.

Unhurriedly he studied the layout of the tote and the bookies. Nothing escaped him, for he was now in that state of alert readiness where every small detail was significant, where he could tell by the punter's expression whether he expected big winnings—a regular or an amateur having a first flutter. The latter Charlie dismissed contemptuously; only the ones with strident beginner's luck were considered worthy of his attention.

Their third race over, Charlie marked down his victim, a man who had won on the last two races and was now collecting rich pickings.

It was his time and he pounced.

As the man turned, pocketing his wallet, Charlie crashed headlong into him. Mutual apologies, and as they disentangled, the man's wallet rested safely with the car key and the lad's notebook in Charlie's pocket, shielded by the raincoat from any rival hands.

As he hurried towards the exit, the tension inside him subsided and he surrendered momentarily to the heady feeling of victory once again. He was almost safely outside when commotion within announced that his victim was aware of the missing wallet. As he quickened his pace, his arm was seized.

For a moment, his face tightened in panic and the instinctive desire for flight.

"Hi, mister. Hoped I'd see you again. Any success on the gee-gees?"

"So-so," said Charlie, relief overcoming his annoyance at the lad's reappearance. "I suppose you've come to repay me?"

"That's it, mister. Met me dad inside. Here's your quid—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thanks for the loan."

Charlie was taken aback. He had never expected to see lad or pound note again. As he thrust it into his pocket, the lad held out his hand.

"That's a fiver I gave you. All me dad had, he'll be wanting his change."

Charlie looked at it, scowled, and swinging his raincoat over his shoulder, he took out his wallet and counted out four pounds.

"Ta, mister. Cheers!" The lad was swallowed by the emerging crowd as Charlie hurried in the opposite direction, to the street where the Rolls waited. Reaching it, feeling triumphant and reassured, he put his hand into his pocket.

No key. The key wasn't there. It had to be! Heart thumping, frantically he began turning out his pockets. As he did so, something else struck him and the beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

Not only the key was missing. So was the punter's stolen wallet. And the boy's notebook.

As realization dawned on him, he swore, shaking with blind murderous fury. He knew he would never recognize the lad again.

That damned brat—one of his own kind! ●

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen July 2007

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414; or email: adsales@dellmagazines.com

AUTHORS

ENEMY MINE, All books in print, Check: www.barrylongyear.net

MERCHANDISE

Murder Mystery Theme Party Game Kits for 4-400 Guests! www.dinnerandamurder.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Marlowe's Mysteries. Mystery books and more, for the collector and reader. www.marlowesmysteries.com.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Girl's Best Friend
BY JUDITH CUTLER

Making Amends
BY JEFFERY DEAVER

The Good Daughter
BY MELODIE JOHNSON HOWE

Makin' Up and Breakin' Up
BY JEREMIAH HEALY

Visit us at:
www.themysteryplace.com

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 130, No. 1. Whole No. 791, July 2007. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0013-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for combined March/April and September/October double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $43.90 in U.S.A. and possessions, $53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-220-7443 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices.
© 2007 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Dell is a trademark registered in the U.S. Patent Office. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

LAUREN KUCZALA
Managing Editor

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director,
Art & Production

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

IRENE LEE
Production Artist/
Graphic Designer

CAROLE DIXON
Senior Production Manager

EVIRA MATOS
Production Associate

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager, Subsidiary Rights
& Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Vice President,
Sales & Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
CONNIE GOON
Advertising Sales Coordinator
Phone: (212) 686-7188
Fax: (212) 686-7414
(Display and Classified Advertising)

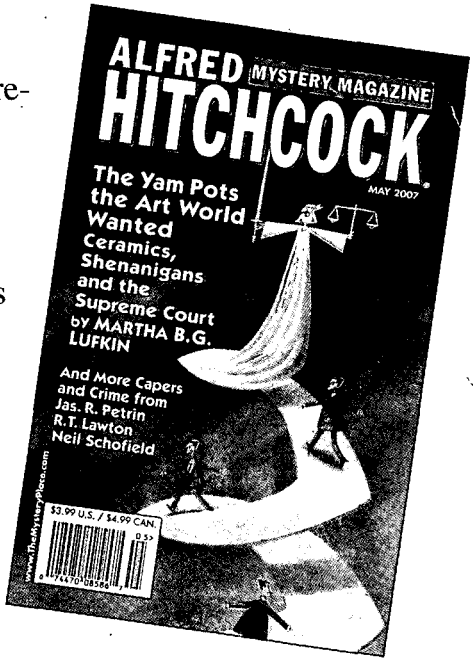
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE 50%!

Now get 6 issues of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine delivered conveniently to your door and SAVE 50% off the newsstand price!

You'll receive 6 entertaining issues* full of suspenseful stories, including never-before-published works by world renowned mystery writers.

That's over $21.00 worth of delightful mystery magazines delivered right to your home for just $10.97!
You save over $10.00!



Order today and SAVE!

To charge your order to MC or Visa, call
TOLL-FREE 1-800-220-7443
(8am-7pm EST) Orders only, please!

BY MAIL

Alfred Hitchcock, Suite S, 6 Prowitt St.
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add $10 per year for shipping and handling (U.S. funds). WA residents: Add state and local taxes to your total order. *We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription.
Offer expires 12/31/08.

47C-NZPFL2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

June 12-17, 2007 at RiverPark!

Be among the first people to celebrate and see staged performances of the best new mysteries that will make their way to Broadway and Hollywood The International Mystery Writers' Festival presents the best new works on several stages during this star-studded festival June 12-17, 2007 in Owensboro, Kentucky

This will be the only new play festival specializing in "Discovering New Mysteries" and staging them live for the general public, media and entertainment industry officials

Celebrate new sleuth-sayers during the Opening Gala Reception on Tuesday, June 12th and then see the inaugural festival stage performances The celebration continues all week at the beautiful multi-stage RiverPark Center The excitement wraps Sunday, June 17th with the Closing Gala Award Ceremony honoring Oscar, Tony & Emmy recognized star Angela Lansbury who Kentucky's governor will honor as the First Lady of Mystery

Ticket prices range from $13 to $29, while formal screenplay fully staged readings will be under $10

For Tickets:

www.newmysteries.org

877.639.6978

For tourist information

(800) 489-113

HATHITRUST DIGITIZED BY GOOGLE
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED